



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



FRIDAY — 11 FEB 2022

	International	National	Regional and Local
Events, Opportunities Go to articles	02/11 UK lifts all testing for vaccinated travelers 02/11 Ukraine talks in Berlin fail; 'frosty' 02/11 US: more Russia troops near Ukraine 02/11 Iran 43rd anniversary Islamic Revolution 02/11 NATO: dangerous moment in Ukraine crisis 02/11 US shows foreign policy focus on Asia 02/11 India court: no hijab for Muslim students 02/11 High energy prices hit Europe utility bills 02/10 Study: school closings far-reaching effects 02/10 WHO: Africa can learn to live w/coronavirus 02/10 Threat: armed nationalists in Ukraine 02/10 US: Americans leave now, no retrieval later 02/10 Land, sea buildup: Russia closes in Ukraine 02/10 Mayor seeks injunction bridge blockade 02/10 Canada trucker protesters: police uneasy 02/10 Paris, Brussels ban convoy-style protests 02/10 Truck bridge blockade shuts auto plants 02/10 Canada trucker protest volatile, determined 02/10 Afghan refugees in UAE protest conditions 02/10 France to buildup nuclear power program 02/10 Europe inflation expected peak early 2022 02/10 Russia skater in Olympics doping drama 02/10 Sudan military rulers step up crackdown 02/10 Global freedoms hit 'dismal' record low 02/10 London police commissioner resigns	02/11 Cleaning up from coronavirus to take years 02/11 Brooklyn pipeline violates civil rights? 02/11 Union drives surge Starbuck stores 02/10 States move to end mask mandates 02/10 Substitute teachers in short supply 02/10 NYC: 3,000 employees face dismissal 02/10 Two cruise lines drop mask requirements 02/10 States end mandates: schools must decide 02/10 Amazon eases mask rules warehouse staff 02/10 Nevada, Vegas casinos drop mask mandate 02/10 Infections, hospitalizations fall but unevenly 02/10 Rapid inflation stokes unease 02/10 Jobless claims fall 3rd straight week 02/10 Fastest climb of inflation since 1982 02/10 Inflation hitting groceries, utilities, rent 02/10 As inflation broadens, more risk will linger 02/10 Army releases first-ever climate strategy 02/10 Audit: IRS lost \$400M to broken machines 02/10 Oakland school closures: a warning sign? 02/10 Inflation, other woes hit Girl Scout cookies 02/10 US approves fighter jet deal for Indonesia 02/09 Experts warn: too soon rollback mask rules	02/10 Gun rights activists gather in Olympia 02/10 New jobless claims below pre-Covid levels 02/10 Seattle landlords: end eviction moratorium 02/10 Seattle private downtown security 'stopgap' 02/10 Court rejects 4th recall on Snohomish sheriff 02/10 SEA preparing for GOAT trips in 2022 02/10 Ski resorts tested by climate, pandemic 02/10 Glacier Peak 'very high' threat for eruption
Cyber Awareness Go to articles	02/11 Half global emails 2021 were spam 02/11 Spain dismantles SIM swapping gang 02/10 Official: Google Analytics violates GDPR 02/10 Cyberattack disrupts Slovenia TV station 02/10 Spy agencies exploit dating apps to recruit 02/10 Malware gang plants incriminating evidence	02/10 FTC: romance scam losses hit record 02/10 Sharp SIM swapping spike: \$68M losses 02/10 Ransomware attacks critical infrastructure 02/10 FritzFrog botnet returns: high infection rate 02/10 Calif. community college data compromised 02/09 Georgia voter information exposed online	
Terror Conditions Go to articles	02/11 ISIS evolves emoji tactics 02/11 Afghan Taliban: explosion near mosque 02/11 Extremist attacks in northern Benin kill 8 02/10 British woman jailed for extremist material 02/10 French troops, militants clash Burkina Faso	02/11 US moves to seize \$7B Afghanistan funds 02/10 Biden rejects critical senior military reports 02/10 Death toll of raid on ISIS leader in question 02/10 Informants tip, spy drone led to ISIS leader 02/10 Panel approves transfer Gitmo detainee	
Suspicious, Unusual Go to articles	02/11 Australia: koalas an endangered species 02/10 Lack of natural snow at Winter Olympics	02/10 CIA program collects data of Americans? 02/10 Diplomats: 'Havana Syndrome' hurt morale 02/09 Real reason not enough truck drivers?	02/11 Wave off Vancouver 'once-in-a-millennium' 02/10 New WA maximum temperature record: 120° 02/10 Bellevue passes Manhattan housing prices
Crime, Criminals Go to articles	02/11 Journalist fatally shot in southern Mexico 02/10 US files first environmental case on Mexico	02/11 Ex-NFL player in healthcare fraud gets 5yrs 02/10 DC high schools threatened for 3rd day 02/10 Arrest in DC high schools bomb threats 02/10 Seattle man in Capitol riot gets 6mo. jail 02/10 Police kill shooting suspect after rampage 02/10 Sold pirated video games; gets 40mo. jail 02/10 Police: this Valentine's Day turn in your ex	02/10 Richland shooter's 'disturbing' behavior 02/10 FAA, police: help identify laser suspects 02/10 Seattle police: shooting at crime hotspot 02/10 Hotline tip: man trafficking minors; arrest 02/10 Home invasion in Pierce Co. turns deadly 02/10 Seattle homeless camp shooting; 1 injured 02/10 Whatcom deputies shot, suspect in custody

[DISCLAIMER and FAIR USE Notice](#)

Events, Opportunities

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	02/11 Hong Kong record Covid infections
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-pledges-support-hong-kong-amid-covid-surge-2022-02-11/

GIST

HONG KONG, Feb 11 (Reuters) - Hong Kong reported a record number of new daily COVID-19 infections on Friday and China said it would fully support the city with its "dynamic zero" coronavirus strategy, as local authorities struggle to control a deepening outbreak.

Hong Kong's chief secretary John Lee, Health Secretary Sophia Chan and Security Chief Chris Tang will meet Chinese officials in neighbouring Shenzhen on Saturday to discuss support measures, the government said in a statement.

The meeting comes as Hong Kong's pursuit of zero COVID infections has stretched hospital and quarantine facilities nearly to their limit, raising the near-term prospect of changes to admissions and isolation policies.

New daily infections rose to at least 1,325 on Friday, health authorities said.

"Our healthcare system is overloaded, it's really beyond capacity," said Chuang Shuk-kwan, a senior health official.

She said there were separately at least 1,500 preliminary positive cases.

Hospital beds for COVID-19 patients in the global financial hub are already at 90% occupancy, data from the city's Hospital Authority showed, while isolation facilities were also nearing their maximum.

China's central government is "highly concerned" about the safety and health of residents as well as the economy and people's livelihoods, a spokesperson for the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office (HKMAO), which comes under China's State Council or cabinet, said in a statement.

It said it would help support Hong Kong's fight against the disease.

"As long as Hong Kong asks, the motherland will surely respond ... Hand in hand, we will surely be able to overcome the epidemic soon," it said.

The Chinese government will help improve Hong Kong's testing capability and set up another quarantine facility, the South China Morning Post reported, citing a Beijing-based source.

Beijing is also preparing to send thousands of medical and lab workers and millions of test kits to Hong Kong, with the daily coronavirus screening capacity to be increased from 100,000 tests to 300,000 tests.

Hong Kong has seen a 10-fold rise in cases since Feb. 1 and medical experts warn the city could see 28,000 daily infections by the end of March, with the unvaccinated elderly a particular worry.

RISING FATALITIES

Five elderly people infected with COVID-19 died this week, after no COVID-linked fatalities since September last year. In total the city has recorded around 20,000 infections and 218 deaths, still far lower than other similar major cities.

Despite only a handful of COVID-19 patients being in critical condition, some hospitals are already full, mostly with people suffering little more than a sore throat.

Medical experts are also worried about an expected surge of infections that could dramatically increase severe infections, especially among the largely-unvaccinated elderly.

Hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to test every day, including elderly and children, queuing for hours in tightly packed lines outside testing centres and raising the risk of infection.

	<p>Following mainland China, Hong Kong is trying to curb outbreaks as soon as possible, in contrast with many other places that are trying to "live with COVID", relying on high vaccination rates to bring protection while easing restrictions.</p> <p>The city's stringent restrictions have turned it into one of the world's most isolated major cities. With flights down 90%, and hardly anyone allowed to transit, Hong Kong on Friday extended a ban on flights from eight countries, including the United States and Britain, and added Nepal to the list.</p> <p>The HKMAO said it was also coordinating with the Guangdong provincial government to ensure the supply of vegetables, fresh food and other necessities into Hong Kong.</p> <p>The former British colony saw a run on vegetables this week after several cross-border truck drivers, who bring in goods from the mainland, tested positive for coronavirus. read more</p> <p>China previously assisted the city in 2020 with a mass coronavirus testing scheme when it sent 600 people to operate lab facilities and tested nearly 2 million of the city's 7.5 million residents.</p> <p>Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam said this week said she was deeply sorry and anxious for the long waits residents faced to get tested or enter isolation facilities.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/11 US: more Russia troops near Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/us-says-russia-masses-more-troops-near-ukraine-invasion-could-come-any-time-2022-02-11/
GIST	<p>MOSCOW/ADELAIDE, Feb 11 (Reuters) - Russia is now massing yet more troops near Ukraine and an invasion could come at any time, perhaps before the end of this month's Winter Olympics, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.</p> <p>Commercial satellite images published by a private U.S. company showed new Russian military deployments at several locations near Ukraine.</p> <p>In his starkest warning yet to Americans in Ukraine to get out now, President Joe Biden said he would not send troops to rescue U.S. citizens in the event of a Russian assault.</p> <p>"Things could go crazy quickly," Biden told NBC News.</p> <p>Blinken, visiting Australia, told a news conference: "We're in a window when an invasion could begin at any time, and to be clear, that includes during the Olympics."</p> <p>The Beijing games end on Feb. 20.</p> <p>"Simply put, we continue to see very troubling signs of Russian escalation, including new forces arriving at the Ukrainian border," Blinken said.</p> <p>Russia has already massed more than 100,000 troops near Ukraine, and this week it launched joint military exercises in neighbouring Belarus and naval drills in the Black Sea.</p> <p>Moscow denies plans to invade Ukraine, but says it could take unspecified "military-technical" action unless a series of demands are met, including promises from NATO never to admit Ukraine and to withdraw forces from Eastern Europe.</p> <p>Several Western countries launched diplomatic pushes this week to persuade Russia to back down, but Moscow brushed them off, yielding no concessions to French President Emmanuel Macron who visited on Monday and openly mocking British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss during a visit on Thursday.</p>

Four-way talks in Berlin between Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France, part of a longstanding peace process in a conflict between Ukraine and Russian-backed separatists, also yielded no progress on Thursday.

Paris said the Russian delegation had agreed to hold more talks but demanded Kyiv negotiate directly with the separatists, a "red line" which Ukraine has rejected since 2014.

U.S.-based Maxar Technologies, which has been tracking the buildup of Russian forces, said images taken on Wednesday and Thursday showed new deployments in several locations in western Russia, Belarus and Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014.

The images could not be independently verified by Reuters.

In Crimea Maxar identified 550 troop tents and hundreds of vehicles newly deployed at Oktyabrskoye airfield north of the city of Simferopol, as well as deployments near the towns of Novoozernoye and Slavne.

In Belarus it identified a new deployment of troops, military vehicles and helicopters at Zhabrovka airfield near Gomel, less than 25 km (15 miles) from the border with Ukraine. And in western Russia it found a large new deployment of troops and forces at the Kursk training area, approximately 110 km (68 miles) to the east of the Ukrainian border.

Russia has not disclosed how many troops it has deployed and says it has the right to move forces around on its territory as it sees fit. It insists they pose no external threat.

DIALOGUE OF THE DEAF AND MUTE

Western countries have mostly stood together in threatening economic sanctions against Russia if it invades Ukraine, but have given conflicting views on the immediacy of the threat.

The United States and Britain have both warned an invasion could come within days. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Thursday the coming days would be the most dangerous moment in Europe's biggest security crisis for decades.

France's Macron, by contrast, has said he thinks Russia does not have designs on Ukraine but wants changes to European security arrangements, and the existing Franco-German-led peace process for Ukraine's separatist conflict provides a way out.

Whatever its intentions, Moscow has responded dismissively as Western countries have tried to turn up diplomatic pressure.

Pictures of Macron, seated far away from Putin at the opposite end of a huge table in the Kremlin, went viral on the internet this week and were widely mocked. The Kremlin said on Friday the seating was necessary because the French president had refused a COVID-19 test administered by Russian doctors.

French officials said waiting three hours for test results was impossible given Macron's travel schedule; French sources also said Macron's office was worried Moscow would sample his DNA.

Britain's Truss was treated to a public upbraiding at a joint Moscow news conference by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who described their talks on Thursday as a "conversation between a mute person and a deaf person".

On Friday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov cited a gaffe by Truss, who had to be corrected by her ambassador when she mistook two Russian provinces for parts of Ukraine, as evidence that Western governments were clueless.

	"This is the reality in which we have to defend our position," he said.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Inflation hitting groceries, utilities, rent
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/where-inflation-is-hitting-hardest-prices-of-groceries-utilities-rent-jump-11644519819?mod=hp_major_pos2#cxrecs_s
GIST	<p>American consumers are kicking off 2022 with some big price increases in everyday purchases. The price of food and utilities surged in January from the previous month, according to the Labor Department. Prices for healthcare and housing have also started to creep up.</p> <p>Vehicle prices, which have been rising rapidly because of a shortage of computer chips, saw inflation moderate in January but remain well above where they were a year ago.</p> <p>Inflation is broadening out and affecting goods and services that had until now been relatively spared by rising prices, said Gus Faucher, chief economist at PNC Financial Services Group.</p> <p>“Businesses are dealing with higher labor costs, they’re dealing with higher input costs and they’re passing some of those along to their consumers,” he said.</p> <p>Higher prices will likely push down consumer confidence, Mr. Faucher said, although he added he doesn’t expect it will have much of an effect on consumer spending, which rose an inflation-adjusted 7.9% in 2021 from the previous year, according to the Commerce Department. Rising wages, plentiful jobs and pent-up savings from pandemic-related stimulus programs should prop up spending and overall economic growth, he said.</p> <p>Below are a few categories that saw significant price changes in January:</p> <p>Groceries</p> <p>Groceries rose a seasonally adjusted 1% in January from December, the Labor Department said, well above overall inflation, which stood at 0.6% on the month. Cereal and bakery products were up 1.8% and meats, poultry, fish and eggs rose 0.3%. Meat prices have risen rapidly over the past year and stand 12.2% above where they were a year ago.</p> <p>Utilities</p> <p>It is getting harder to pay the power and gas bills. The price of electricity rose 4.2% in January from the previous month, as overall energy prices remained volatile. January’s increase was the biggest monthly rise since 2006. The price of power was up 10.7% in January over the previous year. Household gas prices fell 0.5% in January from December but remain an astonishing 23.9% higher than where they were a year ago.</p> <p>Housing</p> <p>Rents ticked up in January, rising 0.5% on the month, the fastest pace since 2001. A measure of housing prices known as owners’ equivalent rents, which represents the price homeowners would pay to rent their own homes, was also up at 0.4% on the month and 4.1% from a year ago.</p> <p>Higher housing prices tend to show up with a few months’ delay in inflation statistics, which means we could see housing rising further as the year progresses even as inflation in other categories moderates or declines.</p> <p>Healthcare</p> <p>Healthcare price inflation was relatively modest throughout the pandemic, as people put off going to the doctor for reasons other than Covid-19 or other emergencies. Now, however, healthcare inflation appears to be creeping up. Medical care services were up 0.6% in January from December, the strongest pace since before the pandemic.</p>

	Vehicles New and used cars and trucks posted some of the steepest price increases since the start of the pandemic, as manufacturers struggled with a surge in demand and a shortage of crucial parts such as computer chips. Inflation for new vehicles was flat in January but remains 12.2% above where it was a year ago. Used car and truck prices rose 1.5% on the month and 40.5% on the year.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Seattle private downtown security ‘stopgap’
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3343034/private-downtown-seattle-security-stopgap/
GIST	<p>Private security is increasingly being relied upon in Seattle’s downtown area. The Downtown Business Association says that is only intended to be a stopgap measure until Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell’s policing plan crystalizes.</p> <p>Those patrols arrive as the Downtown Seattle Association (DSA) revealed that it has retained a private security firm to adequately provide security to the downtown area over concern that SPD is short staffed.</p> <p>“These are dollars we wish we didn’t have to spend,” DSA CEO Jon Scholes told KIRO Newsradio.</p> <p>“These are dollars we need to spend in order to attempt to preserve safety and security downtown. And we’re not the only one spending money in this regard. You know, there’s small businesses and property owners that are digging into their own pockets to hire off-duty officers if they can, because those shifts are hard to staff with a department that’s depleted. In addition to hiring private security, this is not the way we should be delivering safety and security for our city.”</p> <p>Aleksandr Butowicz, founder of the security company Iron and Oak, contracted by the DSA, tells MyNorthwest that his staff have seen a more robust SPD presence downtown in recent weeks (SPD reports 1,100 officers, with approximately 950 of them deployable, as of early February).</p> <p>“We are seeing, in the last last five days, ... a tremendous increase in visible police presence. I’m seeing a turn right now that it looks like we have ... more police presence,” Butowicz said Tuesday.</p> <p>“But visibly, it appears that there are more police in the hotspot areas. So that, in my opinion, will actually reduce the need for private security, because most of these concerns really are something where you could solve it directly with a law enforcement officer, if one were available.”</p> <p>Iron and Oak reports that demand for its services and staffing levels are roughly proportional to the decline in uniformed SPD officers. Iron and Oak currently has eight licensed, unarmed security staff on hand.</p> <p>“There has been more of a demand for our services for calls that I would say are traditionally SPD’s purview,” Butowicz continued. “We’ve gotten a lot of requests for us to respond to, for example, someone trespassing on a property. I’m certain, ... speaking more about DSA, ... we’ve never got a call like that; we never had people calling us for those services. And now, that’s actually a somewhat frequent call that we receive when people are looking for help.”</p> <p>Looking at the long term, Scholes emphasized that the DSA’s demand for private security is temporary.</p> <p>“This is a stopgap measure,” Scholes said on Seattle’s Morning News. “What we believe is really Seattle’s most important streets stretch from Seattle Center, to the county courthouse, to the Pike Place Market.”</p> <p>“[These] should be our best streets,” he added. “... It’s going to be a litmus test on our ability as a city, as a community to more effectively deal with these issues.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/11 NATO: dangerous moment in Ukraine crisis
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/11/ukraine-russia-putin-nato-biden/

KYIV, Ukraine — Diplomatic efforts to resolve the Ukraine crisis remained at a stalemate Thursday, prompting a stark warning from NATO's top official that Europe was facing a "dangerous moment" as Russia prepares to kick off a second day of major military exercises near Kyiv's border that analysts say could be cover for an attack.

President Biden, in an interview on NBC's "Nightly News," urged U.S. citizens in Ukraine to "leave now," adding that "things could go crazy, quickly," given Russia's military strength.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Friday during a visit to Melbourne that the West continues to see "troubling signs of Russian escalation, including new forces arriving at the Ukrainian border."

"As we've said before, we're in a window when an invasion could begin at any time, and to be clear, that includes during the Olympics," Blinken said, referring to speculation among some officials that Russian President Vladimir Putin may wait for the conclusion of the Olympic Games in Beijing to avoid angering China, its key ally. The exercises are scheduled to end on Feb. 20, the same day as the games conclude.

Biden's remarks were aired after a tense encounter Thursday between British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss and her Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, in Moscow. She warned that a renewed Russian invasion of Ukraine would lead to "severe consequences," while Lavrov characterized their meeting as a conversation between the "deaf and the dumb."

In Berlin, negotiators representing Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany failed to come to an agreement after nine hours of discussions seeking a resolution to a long-running conflict between Kyiv and Moscow-backed separatists in Ukraine's contested east. There were no immediate plans for another round of the "Normandy format" talks, though Ukraine's envoy said he hoped negotiations would continue.

Russia, which denies having plans to attack Ukraine, has assembled some 130,000 heavily armed troops around its smaller neighbor, from which it annexed Crimea in 2014. It is participating in the largest Belarus-based training exercise it has ever held, within striking distance of Ukrainian territory. The operations involve tens of thousands of troops and sophisticated weapons systems such as S-400 surface-to-air missiles, Pantsir air defense systems and Su-35 fighter jets.

The Kremlin is also conducting military maneuvers in the Black Sea, near the southern coastline of Ukraine's mainland. This week, a detachment of six Russian landing ships arrived at the Sevastopol port in Crimea. The ships typically are used for unloading troops, vehicles and equipment. Some were used in Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008.

The Russian deployment and Moscow's refusal to back down means Europe should brace "for the worst," NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg told reporters Thursday, adding that the "warning time for a possible attack is going down."

Putin has demanded that NATO permanently bar Ukraine, which he sees as part of his country's sphere of influence, from joining the military alliance. He has also demanded that the bloc pull back its forces from Eastern Europe. The U.S.-led alliance has rejected the ultimatum, citing an open-door policy that allows any nation to seek entry, even as Washington signals its willingness to negotiate on issues Moscow considers of "secondary" importance.

"NATO will not compromise on core principles," Stoltenberg said at a news conference in Brussels with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. "Renewed Russian aggression will lead to more NATO presence, not less."

Defense ministers of NATO member states will meet next week and consider shifting additional troops to bolster the bloc's southeastern flank. Members have already committed to deploying military assets to Bulgaria, and the United States is also moving troops into Romania.

	<p>“We have repeatedly stated at various levels that we have no plans to ‘invade’ or ‘attack’ Ukraine,” Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko told the Tass news agency. “Clearly, establishing peace in Ukraine is not part of NATO’s plans.”</p> <p>Stoltenberg urged for diplomacy to continue, while British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace will meet his Russian counterpart in Moscow on Friday for talks. The visit comes after Wallace announced that 350 British Royal Marines will soon be deployed to Poland in a gesture of solidarity.</p> <p>German Chancellor Olaf Scholz met with leaders of the Baltic states Thursday and pledged “very serious political, economic and strategic consequences” if Russia attacks Ukraine, Reuters reported.</p> <p>Scholz has been criticized at home and abroad for his hands-off approach to the Ukraine situation. Germany is a NATO member but has close economic ties with Moscow, on which it depends for energy imports.</p> <p>Kyiv is hosting a military exercise of its own this week, and officials there condemned the Russian operations as a threat to Ukrainian sovereignty. Ukraine also accused Russia of violating international law by restricting wide swaths of the Black Sea to conduct missile and artillery fire training, a claim that Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov denied Thursday.</p> <p>Peskov said that all Russian naval conduct in the Black Sea is in compliance with international maritime law and that the Kremlin’s ships are not blocking any trade routes, according to Tass.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Paris, Brussels ban convoy-style protests
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/10/europe-ban-freedom-convoy/
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS — Authorities in Paris and Brussels said Thursday that they will try to stop convoys from entering both cities, potentially thwarting plans for staging in Europe the type of demonstration that has paralyzed Ottawa and closed Canada’s busiest border crossing into the United States.</p> <p>Paris police said in a statement that convoys en route to the French capital from across the country will not be able to enter the city for planned rallies this weekend “because of a risk to public order.” Penalties for blocking public roads include prison time, fines and driving bans, the statement noted.</p> <p>Not long afterward, the mayor of Brussels, where several groups planned to converge on Feb. 14, announced that a procession modeled on Canada’s “Freedom Convoy” would not be allowed in. Vehicles arriving to protest will be “diverted,” the mayor said.</p> <p>Although it is not clear whether authorities in either city will succeed in identifying, let alone stopping, motorists bound for rallies, the attempt to preempt their arrival underscores the nervousness in Western capitals as officials watch a small but radical group wreak havoc in Canada.</p> <p>The U.S. Department of Homeland Security is warning that U.S. blockades could affect the Super Bowl in Los Angeles this Sunday, or President Biden’s State of the Union address on March 1. The department has distributed a bulletin to law enforcement agencies warning that a convoy could begin in California as early as mid-February and arrive in D.C. as late as mid-March.</p> <p>The Canadian crisis has led to a rush of international organizing, particularly in Europe, where a range of anti-vaccine, anti-lockdown, far-right and conspiratorial groups have begun to rally under the “Freedom Convoy” banner.</p> <p>A “European Freedom Convoy” flier posted to Twitter on Jan. 31 called on local groups to “block” each European capital, then make their way en masse to Brussels, the headquarters of the European Union and the de facto European capital.</p>

One French Facebook group for the convoy now lists more than 300,000 members, and the European group is nearly 50,000 strong. Each directs joiners to other groups and events.

On Telegram, a messaging app popular with far-right groups, global and European convoy channels boast tens of thousands of members. Those who join are quickly directed to local channels for more than two dozen countries.

The European channels, like the Canadian protests, are animated by a mix of genuine frustration with public health measures, anti-vaccine sentiment and conspiratorial content. Local-language groups often include forwards of English-language content from the U.S. far-right media ecosystem.

Unclear is whether all this will translate into real-world action beyond what Europe has already seen.

Protesting motorists and large anti-lockdown demonstrations are not new in Europe. In 2018, social inequality and outrage over fuel prices helped launch the “yellow vest” movement, an anti-establishment uprising that caused disruption with convoys of slow-moving trucks. During yellow vest protests in Paris, police sometimes used vehicles to keep convoys from entering certain streets.

During the pandemic, some yellow vest groups joined forces with the anti-lockdown movement, a catchall that includes a changeable mix of anti-vaccine, anti-mandate and far-right groups, depending on the location.

In recent months, large protests against coronavirus measures have been held in several European capitals. On Jan. 23, tens of thousands gathered in Brussels, some clashing with police.

A number of convoys set out from locations around France on Wednesday bound for Paris, according to the French convoy Facebook group and local news reports.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Global freedoms hit ‘dismal’ record low
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/10/global-democracy-index-2021-pandemic/
GIST	<p>The state of democracy around the world fell to a record low last year, according to a new report released Thursday that placed blame in large part on pandemic restrictions that have seen many nations struggle to balance a public health emergency with personal freedoms.</p> <p>Less than half the world’s population live under some form of democracy, according to the London-based Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), which conducted its annual Democracy Index survey that rated 167 countries based on measures including electoral processes and civil liberties.</p> <p>The world’s overall score fell to 5.28 out of 10, setting “another dismal record” with the lowest rating since the EIU started producing the index in 2006. It was also the biggest annual decline since 2010. The survey found that 6.4 percent of the world lived in a “full democracy” last year, while more than a third lived under authoritarian rule — with a large share of those in China.</p> <p>The decline did not start with the pandemic, but it has compounded negative trends. From lockdowns to travel bans, the coronavirus led to “an unprecedented withdrawal of civil liberties among developed democracies and authoritarian regimes alike,” the report said.</p> <p>“It has led to the normalization of emergency powers, which have tended to stay on the statute books, and accustomed citizens to a huge extension of state power over large areas of public and personal life.”</p> <p>The pandemic has also exposed inequalities in health care, weaknesses in economic safety nets and government mismanagement in countries trying to curb a virus that has killed millions of people. It has also opened the door for governments to exploit the health crisis to suppress political participation.</p>

	<p>While North America remained the highest-ranked region in the EIU survey, Canada saw “a notable decline,” pushing the country out of the top 10, though it still scored highly, the report said.</p> <p>Meanwhile, it noted that just about 10 percent of Canadians in a separate poll felt they had “a great deal” of freedom of choice and control, with “a worrying trend of disaffection among Canada’s citizens with traditional democratic institutions and increased levels of support for non-democratic alternatives.”</p> <p>The United States, which received a “flawed democracy” classification, fell one spot to number 26 “as political and cultural divisions have become more entrenched.” However, the analysis also said Americans had become much more engaged in politics in recent years, and “a series of high-impact events in 2020—including a politicized pandemic and a presidential election that the two main political parties framed in existential terms—boosted political engagement and participation.”</p> <p>Of all the countries, 21 were classified as “full democracies” while 53 went into the “flawed democracies” category. At the top of the list were Norway, New Zealand and Finland. At the very bottom were Afghanistan, Myanmar and North Korea.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Army releases first-ever climate strategy
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-solutions/2022/02/10/army-military-green-climate-strategy/
GIST	<p>The U.S. Army released its first climate strategy this week, an effort to brace the service for a world beset by global-warming-driven conflicts.</p> <p>The plan aims to slash the Army’s emissions in half by 2030; electrify all noncombat vehicles by 2035 and develop electric combat vehicles by 2050; and train a generation of officers on how to prepare for a hotter, more chaotic world. It is part of a broader effort by the Biden administration to address climate change across government agencies, including at the Pentagon.</p> <p>Here’s why it matters.</p> <p>Why does the Pentagon care about climate change? The nation’s military staff hasn’t suddenly turned into a bunch of tree-huggers. But strategists are increasingly alarmed about the security implications of climate change.</p> <p>The strategy notes “an increased risk of armed conflict in places where established social orders and populations are disrupted. The risk will rise even more where climate effects compound social instability, reduce access to basic necessities, undermine fragile governments and economies, damage vital infrastructure, and lower agricultural production.”</p> <p>Analysts fear what could happen if fights erupt about access to water, for instance. The Mekong River is vital to Southeast Asian nations, and its headwaters are in China. A climate-change-driven drought in Syria that lasted from 2006 to 2010 is widely credited with being among the sparks for the deadly conflict there. The melting of ice sheets in the Arctic Ocean has sparked a great-power competition for control of the north.</p> <p>Spurred by President Biden’s focus on climate change, the Pentagon, the National Security Council and the U.S. intelligence community in October all issued thorough — and somewhat dire — assessments of the threat global warming poses to U.S. security.</p> <p>What’s actually going to change in the Army? The strategy sets out ambitious goals: carbon-free electricity for installations by 2030. Net zero emissions from Army installations by 2045. An increasingly electrified vehicle fleet, including developing electric tactical vehicles — the ones that actually drive out into combat — by 2050. Microgrid installations on all Army posts by 2035, paving the way for increased renewable energy. Thinking more about climate issues when making decisions about how the Army manages its vast land holdings.</p>

The Army also wants to train its personnel about climate issues and to reduce the carbon footprint of its military exercises.

The strategy still needs to be backed by an actual budget. Until then, it remains partly theoretical. And there aren't any price tags in the 12-page document that was released publicly.

But experts say the goals are concrete and should result in swift movement.

"This level of detail is impressive. ... It has very concrete objectives that are measurable," said Erin Sikorsky, who led climate work for the U.S. intelligence community and is now the director of the Center for Climate and Security, a Washington-based think tank. "This is something the U.S. is leading the way on."

Why does it matter what the Pentagon does to address global warming?

The Defense Department has a vast footprint: It accounts for 56 percent of the federal government's carbon footprint and 52 percent of its electricity use. So when it does anything, it creates huge ripples. And the Army is the largest military service. It also means that most efforts to address emissions related to the federal government are minor compared with the Pentagon's.

The military hasn't traditionally been a focus for environmentalists, partly because the culture and politics of the Pentagon and the green movement haven't intersected. But that is starting to change.

"Looking at the federal government, there's just no way around it. You have to have DOD front and center" if the government is going to work on climate change, said Sharon Burke, a former assistant secretary of defense in the Obama administration who works on climate security issues.

"There are things about that that kind of boggle your mind. It has the country's single largest day-care system. It just has a ton of scale," Burke said.

Decisions taken at the top to reduce emissions and incorporate climate change into planning can have a major impact, on everything from the Army's hundreds of thousands of vehicles to the more than 16 million acres of land it manages around the world.

Wait — isn't the military is supposed to fight wars, not battle global warming?

The Army has made clear that its climate efforts are directed toward its core mission: "to fight and win the nation's wars," as Paul Farnan, the acting assistant secretary of the Army for installations, energy and environment, put it Wednesday. "Every one of those steps is going to increase the effectiveness of our fighting force."

Proponents of incorporating climate change into military efforts say that in many cases, doing so can actually improve the fighting effectiveness of troops. In combat, the supply lines that provide fuel for forward operating bases, Humvees and other fighting vehicles are major targets for attack. Taking fossil fuels out of the equation — or even just improving the fuel efficiency of tanks and other heavy vehicles — can save soldiers' lives.

That's what inspired [Richard Nugee](#), one of the most senior generals in the British military, to write a climate strategy for his country's fighting forces last year. He said he was tired of senior defense officials dismissing the climate as an afterthought. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has also made climate change a pillar of the defense alliance, and he made waves last year when [he became the first NATO leader to attend a United Nations climate conference](#).

Critics, though, say the climate issues are a distraction from the core business of the military. At best, skeptics say, they take resources away from bigger issues, like Russia's potential invasion of Ukraine, or the strategic competition with China. At worst, critics say, they actually weaken the military.

“You’re talking about changing military operations. You’re talking about fighting wars in a different way in order to conserve energy,” said Mark Cancian, a former senior Pentagon official who once oversaw defense spending within the Office of Management and Budget.

What else is the Defense Department doing right now on climate issues?

There are efforts across the Pentagon and the individual military services to incorporate climate issues into their planning. In recent weeks, the Defense Department signaled that it wants to move toward carbon-free electricity where it can and that it will start asking its contractors to total up the emissions of the bombs, fighter jets and other military hardware they are supplying to the armed forces.

It adds up to a concerted effort to shift the way the U.S. military thinks about climate issues.

“Climate change threatens America’s security and is altering the geostrategic landscape as we know it,” Army Secretary Christine Wormuth wrote in a foreword to the strategy. “For today’s Soldiers operating in extreme temperature environments, fighting wildfires, and supporting hurricane recovery, climate change isn’t a distant future, it is a reality.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Ski resorts tested by climate, pandemic
SOURCE	https://crosscut.com/news/2022/02/washington-ski-resorts-tested-climate-and-pandemic
GIST	<p>David Severn was 2 years old when he learned to ski at the White Pass Ski Area in Central Washington.</p> <p>Like many others, he started by holding on to his father’s legs as he skied.</p> <p>Eventually, he started skiing on his own. His dad recalled Severn crashing after going very fast during one of those early trips. When his dad went to check if he was OK, he found a laughing child.</p> <p>Many decades later, Severn would watch his own 5-year-old son laugh after a fall. He wants other families to make memories skiing together in the future, too.</p> <p>The future for White Pass — and ski resorts across the U.S. — hinges on their owners and operators tackling many issues and opportunities, including increased demand for skiing during the pandemic, staff shortages, climate change’s impact on snowpack and the ongoing challenges of running capital-intensive operations.</p> <p>Owners and operators have taken several different approaches to respond to those challenges, such as finding uses for their ski areas during the off-season. Others seek an infusion of capital or fresh eyes through new ownership.</p> <p>For Severn, ensuring the resort’s long-term stability meant joining a group of Yakima businessmen to buy White Pass in December. The former owners had been quietly searching for new owners for several years, hoping to find a new generation invested in the area’s continued success.</p> <p>“We had an interest in maintaining the culture and feel of the place,” Severn said. “We thought it was a great opportunity to get ourselves involved.”</p> <p>Going corporate</p> <p>While White Pass continues to have local ownership, large companies have acquired ski areas in the past few years, said Adrienne Saia Isaac, director of marketing and communications at the National Ski Areas Association.</p> <p>A dozen U.S. and Canadian companies own more than 100 resorts in the U.S. and Canada, among other countries. The two largest, Vail Resorts and Alterra Mountain Company, both in Colorado, own nearly half of them.</p>

For those companies, 2018 was a big year for major acquisitions in Washington state. In May, Michigan-based Boyne USA [bought Summit at Snoqualmie](#), at the border of King and Kittitas counties. That was followed with Vail Resorts [purchase of Stevens Pass](#), about 85 miles east of Seattle, in August. and Alterra's [acquisition of Crystal Mountain](#), located in the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest in Pierce County, in October.

“Conglomerates that own many ski areas generally have operational experience and increased access to capital, which is critical for maintaining a ski area for the future,” Isaac said.

But the majority of ski resorts in the U.S. remain locally owned or run by nonprofit organizations, she said. Such a model may work well for ski areas that serve the surrounding community rather than cater to out-of-state tourists.

There are advantages to different ownership models, depending on the ski area’s needs, Isaac said.

“You have to know who your audience and your guest base is,” she said. “You also have to be honest about your operating overhead.”

Accessibility to the community

The [Loup Loup Ski Bowl](#), a ski area about 15 miles east of Twisp in north central Washington, is among 33 of the 337 members of the National Ski Areas Association run by a nonprofit. Generally, those areas have a strong loyalty base and focus on strengthening the community, Isaac said.

“You generally focus on the next generation of skiers and riders,” she said. “It’s focusing less on the destination guests and more on local community guests.”

The nonprofit that runs Loup Loup has prided itself on its ability to provide experiences that are financially accessible to those who live in the area. A weekend day pass at Loup Loup is \$60, about half of the \$129 price at Stevens Pass. Loup Loup also provides free and discounted passes to local students.

But like other ski area operators, Loup Loup needs to figure out how to continue providing lower prices while having enough to cover overhead costs.

And there’s also the issue of changing weather conditions, namely shorter winters. Over the last decade, a typical ski season went from 60 operating days to an average of 45 in recent years, said Brent Nourse, Loup Loup’s executive director. And this season, there's no guarantee the ski area will reach that many days. That means fewer days to generate revenue.

Last summer, Nourse started in the newly formed executive director position of Loup Loup. Along with maintaining the day-to-day operations, Nourse is tasked with making a plan to keep the nonprofit — and the ski area it runs — financially sustainable.

Raising prices isn’t an option, Nourse said. “We would, for lack of a better term, ostracize the population segment we’re here to support.”

The ski area saw one way for long-term financial sustainability: year-round use. Those plans would include mountain bike paths so Loup Loup could be used in the summer, and starting a year-round outdoor school that would offer lessons in climbing and biking, along with skiing. That would generate new revenue.

This expansion would provide additional opportunities for youth in the community, and having more opportunities may prompt more people to donate to the foundation.

“It’s not enough to ask and beg for money, we also have to be responsible [with funds],” he said.

White Pass transition

Kevin McCarthy, who had served as general manager and co-owner of White Pass for several decades said the 2014-2015 season had him thinking seriously about the area's future. That year, mild and dry weather provided little to no snow on the state's ski areas.

Being shut down because of the weather could have created a precarious financial situation, but a lender came through, providing loans to cover snowmaking that would provide sufficient terrain for skiing.

"It did save us that year," McCarthy said.

Still, the experience made McCarthy and the rest of the White Pass ownership group take a serious look to the future — namely to do what's necessary to be prepared for more bad seasons.

"It just dawned on us that we needed a different ownership makeup and one that had a little more financial horsepower," he said.

However, the bottom line couldn't be the only factor. McCarthy also wanted new owners committed to preserving the local family-friendly ski hill environment.

"And the fact of the matter was most of us on the board were getting well into our 60s," he said. It was time for the next generation."

The start of that new generation came last July with Rikki Cooper taking over the general manager position. Cooper has skied on White Pass since she was a child and had done a variety of jobs on White Pass, including accounting at the White Pass administration office.

Like Cooper, White Pass' new owners — David Severn, Andrew Sundquist, Dan Plath, Adam Dolsen and Patrick Smith — grew up skiing at White Pass and have continued to visit with their spouses and children, ranging in age from 2 to 15.

Severn said his group isn't looking to make major changes yet, and is putting its trust in the experience of Cooper and on McCarthy, who remains on staff to aid in the transition.

"I think the main thing is just to learn as much as we can from Kevin and Rikki," he said.

Preventing overcrowding

During one Sunday in January, White Pass was busy but not overcrowded. Parking lots were full, but visitors could find a spot within a reasonable time. Waits for the chair lift were short. The lodge buzzed with activity, but there were still empty tables and seating areas.

The magic number for White Pass is roughly 4,000 visitors. Anything more would be too many. Cooper and the rest of the resort's staff pays close attention to season pass and day ticket sales to ensure they don't go overcapacity.

Many White Pass projects in the works, such as a new building at the base of the mountain, a new lift and expansion of its Nordic area — where people go for cross-country skiing and snowshoeing — aim to better accommodate new and longtime visitors.

"Right now we're at a nice point. The parking lots are full, the lift lines are full, the lodges are just full," Cooper said.

Capacity challenges are on the mind of every ski area operator and owner. And the challenges were exacerbated during the pandemic, which brought increased demand in all recreational activities. There were roughly 59 million U.S. ski resort visits during the 2020-2021 season, the fifth-highest total dating back to the 1978-1979 season, according to the National Ski Areas Association.

And, like many other sectors, ski resorts are dealing with staffing shortages, making it more difficult to operate at full capacity.

In recent months, skiers have expressed ire at [Stevens Pass](#) as it closed many of its ski trails because of staffing shortages. More than 44,000 people signed a [petition](#) asking Vail Resorts to be held accountable for the inability to access ski areas, as well as a deterioration of the overall experience.

Central to the issue were Vail Resorts' Epic Pass, which were supposed to provide access to multiple Vail Resorts ski resorts throughout the U.S. and Canada. Petition commenters said they were angry about spending money on passes that ultimately did not provide sufficient access.

Companies like Vail Resorts use season passes, which enable access to multiple resorts they own, as a means to bring in cash. It also provides a boost to their bottom line for stockholders, as many of these companies are publicly traded, said Heather Hansman, a Seattle-based ski writer and author of *Powder Days*, a book looking at the impact of the business of skiing on its culture.

"[Stevens Pass] sold more passes than they had capacity for," she said.

In a move to fix the problem, Stevens Pass brought in Tom Fortune as interim general manager last month. Fortune grew up skiing at Stevens Pass and started his career there.

Since arriving, Fortune has written [numerous blog posts](#) and Facebook messages to update customers on several issues, including capacity. The ski area is also offering season pass holders an opportunity to get a discount for the next season's pass for just Stevens Pass or a credit that could be used on the resort's restaurant, ski school or retail areas if they purchased or renewed an Epic Pass.

Fortune said he felt staff have made progress in opening more portions of the resort. He said Stevens Pass has been able to open more terrain through streamlining of the hiring process and by reaching out to former employees.

Frequent communication is crucial in regaining the trust of consumers, he said. Feedback has been crucial, as they work to increase the availability of its ski terrain.

While Stevens Pass' woes have been the most public, it's hardly the only ski area dealing with capacity challenges, said Hansman, the *Powder Days* author.

"Everyone is trying to figure it out," she said.

At White Pass, that meant selling fewer season passes and day lift tickets. McCarthy said it's essential not to let the lure of additional profits come at the cost of the customer experience.

Capacity issues can hurt the entire industry, not just an individual ski area or resort, he said. One bad experience could discourage people from returning.

Or it might prompt overcrowding at other ski areas taking on customers turned away elsewhere.

"That's the worst thing you can do: Invite somebody up and then send them home because 'Oh, we invited too many people,'" he said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Study: school closings far-reaching effects
SOURCE	https://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20220210-pandemicrelated-school-closings-likely-to-have-far-reaching-effects-on-child-wellbeing
GIST	A global analysis has found that kids whose schools closed to stop the spread of various waves of the coronavirus lost educational progress and are at increased risk of dropping out of school. As a result, the study

says, they will [earn less money from work over their lifetimes](#) than they would have if schools had remained open.

Educational [researchers like me](#) know these students will feel the [effects of pandemic-related school closures](#) for many years to come. Here are four other ways the closings have affected students' well-being for the long term.

1. Academic Progress

At the end of the 2020-2021 school year, most students were about [four to five months behind](#) where they should have been in math and reading, according to a July 2021 report by McKinsey and Co., a global management consulting firm.

When the researchers looked at the data from fall 2021, though, they found [students attending majority-white schools are catching up](#). But students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds – including those attending majority-Black or low-income schools – are falling further behind. As a result, students attending majority-Black schools are now estimated to be a full year behind those attending majority-white schools.

Differences also can vary by grade level. High schools have been [closed more total days](#) than elementary schools. According to a recent news report, [2021 graduation rates dipped](#) across the country, and some education leaders fear future graduating classes may be hit even harder. Schools have scrambled to provide options such as credit recovery to boost graduation rates, leaving concerns about the quality of learning.

College and university leaders have been [preparing](#) for first-year students with less knowledge, weaker study habits and more difficulty concentrating than new college arrivals in past years.

2. Social-Emotional Development

Even early in the pandemic, [school closings were harming students' social and emotional well-being](#), according to a review of 36 studies across 11 countries including the U.S. By summer 2021, [teachers and administrators in the U.S.](#) said students felt more emotional distress, disengagement, depression, anxiety and loneliness than in previous years.

When schools resumed in fall 2021, large numbers of children in the U.S. had [lost a primary caregiver](#) over the previous year to COVID-19. A colleague and I raised concerns about the [anxiety and grief](#) those students would likely feel.

In addition, [28% of all parents](#) of children in grades K-12 are “very concerned” or “extremely concerned” about their child’s mental health and social and emotional well-being. That’s down from a high of 35% in spring 2021, but is still 7 percentage points higher than before the pandemic. Parents of Black and Hispanic students are 5 percentage points more likely to be worried than parents of white students.

Schools and organizations have focused resources on supporting students’ social, emotional and mental health.

The [U.S. Department of Education](#), for example, recommends, based on research, that teachers integrate lessons around compassion and courage into classroom activities, and that schools establish wellness teams to help students.

States have said they plan to address these needs with [federal funds meant to help schools respond to the pandemic](#). In [Connecticut](#), for example, school districts will hire additional mental health support staff, offer social-emotional programs and partner with local agencies to increase access to supports.

3. Behavioral Habits

The return to in-person learning has been accompanied by school leaders’ [reports](#) of increasing student misbehavior and threats of violence. These increases were more likely to be reported in larger districts and where most students had engaged in remote or hybrid learning – rather than in-person instruction – during the prior school year.

Viral social media “challenges” – like memes on TikTok suggesting students “[smack a staff member](#)” or skip school on a particular day – certainly aren’t helping educators provide safe and supportive environments.

Parents’ distress is also affecting their children. Students whose parents are depressed, anxious, lonely and exhausted are [more likely to misbehave in school](#) – and [that connection grew stronger](#) during lockdown periods when schools were closed.

Meanwhile, news reports show students are [missing more school](#) than they were before the pandemic, with more kids out for more than 15 days of a school year. Given [links](#) between chronic absenteeism and increased high school dropout rates, [researchers warn](#) this increase in missed school could lead between 1.7 million and 3.3 million students in eighth through 12th grade to not graduate on time.

4. Physical Health

Adults have suffered [hair loss, sore eyes, irritable bowels and skin flare-ups](#) as a result of the pandemic. One study found that Chinese preschool children whose schools closed during the pandemic [were shorter than preschoolers](#) in previous years, though the researchers did not observe noteworthy differences in weight change.

Schools can be a primary place for children to access physical activity and healthy food. Amid school closures, researchers are exploring the effects of losing out on these benefits. During lockdowns in Italy, [children with obesity engaged in less physical activity](#), slept and used screens more and increased their consumption of potato chips and sugary drinks.

In the U.S., [1 in 4 families](#) with school-age children don’t have reliable access to food. Abrupt school closures cut off [more than 30 million children](#) from free and reduced-price lunches and breakfasts delivered at school.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees school food programs, provided waivers to [let schools provide meals](#) in ways that fit their students’ needs. In Connecticut, for example, researchers found that letting families know about wider availability and pickup sites for to-go school meals [boosted the number of students who received food](#) during the pandemic.

Time will tell if the costs of school closings will be [worth the benefits](#). These early indicators show that decisions are not as simple as reducing the physical health risks of COVID-19. A full assessment would consider the effects across all aspects of child well-being, including how diverse populations are affected.

Connection, collaboration and positive interaction are fundamental to [healthy childhood](#) growth and development. Working together, schools, families and communities can [assess and address every child's needs](#) to reduce the lasting effects of school closings.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/11 Union drives surge Starbucks stores
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/feb/11/starbucks-union-organizing-drives-across-us
GIST	<p>A union organizing drive among workers at corporate run Starbucks stores, the largest coffeehouse chain in the world, has surged in recent weeks throughout the US, organizers and workers say.</p> <p>The development comes in the wake of union election victories at two of three stores in the Buffalo, New York, area that held union votes with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in December.</p> <p>It also comes amid allegations that seven Starbucks workers in Memphis were fired in retaliation for union organizing.</p>

More than [70 stores](#) in at least 20 US states have now filed for union elections since those wins, representing [more than 1,300](#) workers at Starbucks, which previously had no union representation among its corporate-run locations in the US.

“We were inspired by the partners in Buffalo that managed to do something many of us have dreamed of for a long time. It’s something we didn’t think was possible, but they really pushed through and showed the rest of us across the nation that we could use our voices and actually unionize,” said Hannah McCown, a Starbucks barista in Overland, Kansas, whose store has recently filed to hold a union election.

McCown said their district manager had held aggressive conversations with workers since the organizing campaign went public and that the store was hiring new employees rather than fix the scheduling issues and short staffing that workers have been experiencing.

“We are just looking to have our voices heard at a company that we really put everything into,” added McCown. “We are the backbone of this company and while we do believe this is a great company to work for, we do believe things could be done better.”

Maddie Levans, a barista for over four years at one of the first Starbucks stores in Philadelphia to file for a union election, explained the union victories in Buffalo inspired her and her co-workers to start the unionizing campaign with Starbucks Workers United. She said her co-workers had already been discussing issues they were having with Covid regulations, accountability for management that needed attention and the disconnect between baristas and corporate.

“It’s so reassuring to see so many stores across the country do this and to be part of that wave as one of the first two stores in Philadelphia, let alone Pennsylvania, was phenomenal,” said Levans. “It’s time for Starbucks to actually treat us like partners. They call us partners, but when we’re concerned about different business practices and different problems with how Starbucks is run, we get shut down.”

Workers at Starbucks in Buffalo and around the US have criticized Starbucks for aggressively opposing the unionization efforts at their stores. Alleged actions include [reports](#) of union avoidance meetings with workers, [texts](#) encouraging workers to vote no to the union, an influx of corporate management at stores holding union elections, [allegations of unfair labor practice charges](#) made by workers with the National Labor Relations Board and [the Memphis firings](#).

Starbucks has [retained](#) at least 30 different attorneys with the union avoidance firm Littler Mendelson to represent the company through NLRB proceedings.

“This is a national movement that partners across the US are joining and getting involved in. It’s organic in the way it’s grown and it will continue its trajectory to be massive in the coming weeks,” said Richard A Minter, director of organizing and vice-president of Workers United.

Minter criticized Starbucks’ response to the union organizing efforts, as the company has continued to encourage workers to vote against unionizing.

“It’s something that Starbucks needs to reconsider and immediately stop the anti-union behavior, stop this anti-union rhetoric, allow these partners to be true partners and allow their voices to be heard,” Minter said, “rather than tell them ‘we hear you’, yet they don’t see them or hear them. So a reckoning is coming.”

Cathy Creighton, director of Cornell University Institute Industrial Labor Relations Buffalo Co-Lab, explained vast wealth and racial inequality worsened by the pandemic has driven young workers at Starbucks to unionize. Starbucks [reported](#) \$4.2bn in net earnings in 2021 and the CEO, Kevin Johnson, received [more than \\$20m](#) in compensation in 2021, up 39% from 2020 and 6% from 2019.

“Starbucks employees are front-facing the public and took their life in their hands by going to work and did not see the same largesse come their way,” said Creighton.

She said that labor law in the US was outdated and strongly favored employers, as only [6.1%](#) of the private US workforce is unionized, yet a [strong majority](#) of the population supports unions.

“That is not happenstance. It’s an intentional national labor policy which allows employers to crush worker movements and not agree to first contracts with employees,” said Creighton. “Despite the deck being stacked against them, workers are fed up and are taking matters into their own hands by seeking a voice in their workplace and a seat at the table.”

A spokesperson for Starbucks denied all allegations of union busting and retaliation, citing labor shortages around the US have created short staffing at stores in some markets, with new hiring needed at some stores. The spokesperson also argued meetings with partners are to educate workers on the union election process and are within the company’s legal rights.

In regards to firings of workers in Memphis, Starbucks disputed allegations of retaliation and characterized the firings as responses to safety and security violations, though workers have [argued](#) those violations were selectively enforced and refer to a TV news interview they did in the store after hours about the union drive.

The spokesperson deferred comment to two letters written in December 2021 by [Johnson](#) before the union election in Buffalo and the [executive vice-president of North America, Rossann Williams](#), after the election.

“From the beginning, we’ve been clear in our belief that we do not want a union between us as partners, and that conviction has not changed. However, we have also said that we respect the legal process,” wrote Williams.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/11 Brooklyn pipeline violates civil rights?
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/11/brooklyn-pipeline-violates-black-lation-civil-rights-new-york
GIST	<p>At first glance, the construction along the Brooklyn streets appeared routine. “You wouldn’t think anything of it,” said Fabian Rogers, a community organizer in Brownsville, a majority Black neighborhood where construction began in 2017.</p> <p>It wasn’t until years later, in 2020, that he learned that the overturned streets were making way for a fracked gas pipeline. “It just felt like a big slap in the face – to have [a pipeline] in my backyard that I didn’t know about,” he said.</p> <p>Rogers and other residents have spent the last two years protesting National Grid’s 7-mile pipeline, which zigzags through predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods, bypassing whiter, wealthier parts of Brooklyn. Formally known as the Metropolitan Reliability Project, the pipeline is often referred to as the north Brooklyn pipeline. They have blocked the pipeline’s construction at demonstrations and some have stopped paying part of their utility bills, in an effort to divert funding from the project.</p> <p>Last summer, they went a step further filing a complaint against the utility and state that argues the pipeline has resulted in racial discrimination, violating Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. (Title VI prohibits federally-funded entities from discriminating on the basis of race, gender, and other protected identities).</p> <p>Historically, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has been slow to act on these types of complaints, rarely finding evidence of discrimination. But under the Biden administration, the agency has committed to change this. How the EPA responds to this challenge – in which Black, Indigenous, and brown-led community groups say a fracked gas pipeline represents a violation of their civil rights – will be a test of the agency’s ability to execute on that promise.</p>

Not long after the complaint was filed, two federal investigations were launched into New York state agencies. The lawyers behind the complaint hope that it will result in a full environmental review of the pipeline and connected facility for storing and refining the methane gas, which [awaits an air permit](#). Ultimately, they hope that the gas in the pipeline – which began operating in 2020 – is permanently shut off.

“It would be a real mistake if the state doesn’t listen to the communities that it is designed to protect – that already have a history of dealing with environmental harm and pollution,” says Britney Wilson, a co-counsel to the complaint and an associate law professor and director of the Civil Rights and Disability Justice Clinic at [New York](#) Law School.

The pipeline cuts through the designated [environmental justice areas](#) of Brownsville, Ocean-Hill, Bushwick and East Williamsburg, neighborhoods long overburdened with toxic hazards from a history of racist policies. Large swaths of these neighborhoods were [historically redlined](#), ineligible for federally backed loans. All neighborhoods have some of the [highest rates](#) of adult and child asthma in New York City, a legacy of its history of polluting industries and lack of public benefits. The pipeline has a terminal in Greenpoint, where one the largest oil spills in the country is still being remediated.

“National Grid treated Brownsville like a backyard, but there’s a whole community back here,” said Rogers. “Folks have been supporting each other. Folks have been making it happen.”

Responding to a request for comment, a National Grid spokesperson maintains that the utility company complied with all laws.

The EPA was established just over 50 years ago. In that time, the agency has only made one final finding of discrimination.

In 2017, the agency reached the [conclusion](#) that the permitting process for a power plant in Flint, Michigan, was effectively discriminating against African American residents. But it took the EPA more than 20 years to reach that point; the complaint against the Genesee Power Station was first submitted in 1992.

The Center for Public Integrity [found](#) that the EPA rejected or dismissed over 90% of the civil rights abuse allegations, from 1996 to 2013, while only 5% of complaints were resolved with voluntary or informal agreements. To date, the agency has not once restricted federal funding for a civil rights violation.

But under the Biden administration, there have been signs that the EPA wants to put environmental justice at the forefront of its policies.

In October, the agency released a strategic plan [draft](#) that aims to revamp its civil rights enforcement program. The plan states the EPA will “vigorously enforce” federal civil rights law to “address the legacy of pollution in overburdened communities that results from discriminatory actions, whether direct or indirect, intentional, or unintentional”. This reflects a sharp departure from both the Obama and Trump administration’s strategic plans, which didn’t mention civil rights – let alone make it a central objective.

“This could possibly be a turning point with how the EPA approaches environmental racism,” said Anjana Malhotra, a senior attorney at the National Center for Law and Economic Justice and a co-counsel to the complaint. “It’s a landmark acknowledgement of how [the EPA] hasn’t addressed environmental injustice.”

After community groups filed their complaint against the north Brooklyn pipeline, the EPA launched an investigation into New York’s department of environmental conservation, while the department of transportation began investigating New York’s public service commission. Those investigations are currently paused while the federal agencies meet with the state to seek an informal resolution.

In a recent development, Malhotra and Wilson were invited to meet with federal agencies in January. There, the co-counsels presented a [letter](#) reiterating why it is “unequivocally clear” the environmental conservation department violated the law and to push for greater inclusion of their clients in the informal resolution. Typically, the process doesn’t include the complainants, but the EPA and transportation department are developing a new model to better include the impacted communities, according to Malhotra and Wilson.

It’s an important development, given that Brooklyn residents claim they never had the opportunity to consent to the pipeline – a frequent complaint shared by environmental justice communities.

“[National Grid] never reached out to me, never reached out to my fellow neighbors, none of us,” said Rogers, a member of Brownsville Green Justice, one of the groups behind the complaint.

If no agreement can be reached, the investigations will resume – with a timeline of 180 days in total to potentially arrive at preliminary findings of discrimination.

A DPS spokesperson claims the agency’s decision to approve the pipeline was based on “a robust factual record”, while a environmental conservation department spokesperson similarly claims that the agency “subjects every application to rigorous review of all applicable federal and state standards”.

With regard to the EPA’s record on environmental justice, there are some promising changes. Marianne Engelman-Lado, a lawyer who has previously [described](#) the agency as “spectacularly unsuccessful at ensuring that recipients of EPA funding comply with the non-discrimination provisions of Title VI”, was appointed to the agency last year.

The EPA has also issued two letters with preliminary findings of civil rights violations in 2021, for separate complaints in [California](#) and [Missouri](#). And in September, the agency responded to an [audit](#) from the office of inspector general with [measures and deadlines](#) for improving civil rights oversight – from more guidance for permitting decisions to initiating investigations even before a complaint is lodged.

These moves could mean good news for organizers like the ones challenging the north Brooklyn pipeline.

“Our neighborhoods in Brooklyn have always been dumping zones,” said Pati Rodriguez, a community organizer with Mi Casa Resiste, a Bushwick-based group resisting gentrification and displacement, and one of the complainants. “[But] these are our neighborhoods that we’ve stewarded.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Russia skater in Olympics doping drama
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/figure-skating-olympics-doping-roc-11644551561?mod=hp_lead_pos10
GIST	<p>BEIJING—The results of the team figure skating competition at the Winter Olympics here are hanging in the balance after sports officials confirmed Friday that the 15-year-old superstar of the Russian Olympic Committee team had a positive test for a banned substance in December.</p> <p>The International Testing Agency, which oversees testing at the Olympics, ended days of speculation on Friday when it acknowledged the result for Kamila Valieva, the teenager who became the first female skater to land a quadruple jump at the Olympic Games while clinching the victory for the ROC in the team event on Monday.</p> <p>A possible sanction against Valieva could clear the way for a reordering of the team medals, with the United States potentially moving up from silver to gold, Japan from bronze to silver, and moving Canada onto the podium. It could also alter the outcome of the women’s event next week, in which Valieva was favored to lead a possible ROC sweep of the podium.</p> <p>The ITA said that Valieva tested positive for trimetazidine—a banned heart drug—at the Russian National Championships in St. Petersburg in late December, in a sample that was collected by the</p>

Russian Anti-Doping Agency. The result was reported Feb. 8 by an accredited Swedish laboratory, according to the ITA, one day after Valieva finished skating for the ROC in the Olympic team competition.

The ITA said that RUSADA then suspended the athlete from continuing her participation in the Beijing Games, but Valieva successfully challenged her suspension on Feb. 9, with RUSADA lifting it. The International Olympic Committee, it said, will appeal the decision in pursuit of a resolution before Valieva is due to compete again on Feb. 15.

The IOC declined to comment beyond ITA's statement at a press conference on Friday morning due to the ongoing legal case.

"It is a very active case and we are waiting for it to be fully seen to the end," said spokesman Mark Adams. "We want to expedite it as quickly as possible...for all the athletes concerned."

The positive test presents a particularly explosive controversy because it involves Russia, which is currently serving a ban on competing at major international sports events, including the Olympics, until December 2022 after the World Anti-Doping Agency found it guilty of running a state-sponsored doping program at the 2014 Sochi Olympics.

As a result, the team does not compete under the name of Russia or its flag—it is called the Russian Olympic Committee here and doesn't hear its national anthem when it wins. Russian officials have previously called Russia's doping suspension politically motivated. And international sports bodies have been accused of being timid in the face of repeated rule violations.

"Such cases are not helpful for the Games," Adams acknowledged Friday.

Trimetazidine is typically used to treat angina pectoris and is banned by the World Anti-Doping Agency as the drug can also increase blood flow, which is likely related to increased cardiac output to the benefit of an athlete.

The ROC said that Valieva repeatedly passed doping tests before and after the positive result, including in Beijing during the figure skating tournament.

The organization said that Valieva currently has the right to train and take part in the competition, pending the appeal. She appeared at official practices on Thursday and Friday.

"The Russian Olympic Committee is taking comprehensive measures to protect the rights and interests of the members of the ROC team, and to keep the honestly won Olympic gold medal," the organization said.

The Figure Skating Federation of Russia referred to the ROC statement. The Federation has maintained that every one of its athletes is clean.

Valieva is the presumptive favorite for gold in the women's singles event next week. In Russia, reports about Valieva had been met with consternation and fury. Some lawmakers suggested a political motive behind the doping allegations.

"Before our eyes, this is again a clash between good and evil," the Russian Foreign Ministry's Maria Zakharova told newspaper Izvestia, referring to the doping allegations. "And the desire of evil to endlessly do so that good loses its strength."

Valieva, in her first year of being old enough to compete at the senior level, has emerged as the leader of a pack of talented Russian skaters capable of sweeping the podium by unleashing a slew of exceptionally difficult jumps.

	That group, almost all of whom are coached by Eteri Tutberidze of Moscow, have achieved extraordinary success through their technical prowess. But their slight frames and short competitive careers have also drawn scrutiny of the physical and mental toll on athletes who have often retired before they reach the age of majority.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Mayor seeks injunction bridge blockade
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/trucker-protests-in-canada-prompt-ford-gm-to-scale-back-work-at-auto-plants-11644507448?mod=hp_lead_pos3
GIST	<p>A Canadian judge on Thursday delayed a bid by the Canadian border city of Windsor, Ontario, to obtain a court order to remove demonstrators who for four days have blocked most traffic on a crucial U.S.-Canada trade corridor.</p> <p>The protest against Covid-19 vaccine mandates at the Ambassador Bridge, which connects Detroit with Windsor, forced Detroit-based auto makers to scale back production in the U.S. and Canada and temporarily send employees home because parts required for assembly couldn't be delivered.</p> <p>Chief Justice Geoffrey Morawetz of Ontario's Superior Court said he understood the economic disruption the protest had caused. Nevertheless, he said he would defer the hearing, and possible judgment, until midday Friday, to give the protesters an opportunity to respond.</p> <p>"I don't want to take actions today that are just going to exacerbate an already difficult situation," he said. He instructed city officials to publish its injunction application on a website, and to issue a press release providing the website address so demonstrators could review and respond.</p> <p>"The economic harm that this occupation is having on international trade is not sustainable and it must come to an end," Windsor Mayor Drew Dilkens said Thursday before the hearing.</p> <p>The bridge closure led Ford Motor Co. to cut output at an engine plant in Windsor, Ontario, and at an SUV factory in Oakville, Ontario, just west of Toronto, a company spokesman said.</p> <p>"We hope this situation is resolved quickly because it could have widespread impact on all auto makers in the U.S. and Canada," the spokesman said.</p> <p>Commercial vehicles are being rerouted north to the Blue Water Bridge, which crosses the St. Clair River and connects Port Huron, Mich., with Sarnia, Ontario, roughly 66 miles north of the Detroit-Windsor crossing. Trucks on Wednesday were backed up more than 17 miles on Michigan highways leading to that bridge. A spokeswoman for Michigan's Department of Transportation said much of that congestion had cleared Thursday, as traffic in the area decreased and border agents worked through the night to process commercial vehicles. Wait times Thursday had dropped to an hour, she said.</p> <p>Stellantis NV, which makes Ram and Jeep vehicles, said all of its North American plants were running normally as of Thursday morning. The company said a number of U.S. and Canadian plants cut short second shifts Wednesday night because of parts shortages caused by the partial closure of the Detroit-Windsor bridge.</p> <p>General Motors Co. on Thursday canceled the morning work shift at an assembly plant in Lansing, Mich., because of a parts shortage stemming from the disruption on the bridge, a spokesman said. GM also called off an evening work shift Wednesday at the same plant, which makes Chevrolet and Buick sport-utility vehicles.</p> <p>Toyota Motor Corp. plants in Ontario and Kentucky were offline Thursday because of supply-chain disruptions related to the bridge blockade, a company spokeswoman said.</p>

The protesters, with the help of 500 heavy-duty trucks and other vehicles that are clogging traffic in Ottawa and Windsor, are demanding that governments in Canada at all levels eliminate Covid-19 vaccine mandates and social restrictions that require people to be fully vaccinated against the virus to enter restaurants, gyms and movie theaters. The number of protesters between the two cities has ranged from a few hundred during the week to several thousand last weekend.

The scale-back in vehicle assembly and auto-parts production is the first sign of economic fallout from the protests, originally organized by truckers and their supporters. The protests have disrupted traffic and daily life in the Canadian capital, Ottawa, and are now at the 1.6-mile Ambassador Bridge.

“These interruptions are currently resulting in short-term layoffs,” said Shane Wark, a senior official at Unifor, the union that represents workers at auto-assembly plants. “The situation is fluid, and changing by the hour.”

Brian Kingston, president of the Canadian Vehicle Manufacturers’ Association, said the auto makers are working with alternative shipping companies to mitigate further disruptions.

“If this is allowed to carry on, the problem will only become more acute,” he said.

Limited traffic from Canada can enter the U.S. via the Ambassador Bridge. However, commercial trucks and other vehicles originating in the U.S. can’t enter Canada, as roughly 50 vehicles, among them five heavy-duty trucks, were stopped in front of the exit from the bridge onto a major artery, Huron Church Road. Scrawled on many of the vehicles were messages such as “End Government Corruption!” and “Say no to the Satanic World Order.” People milled about carrying Canadian flags and children played street hockey and drew on the road with colored chalk.

Jake Dyck, a truck driver who makes his living hauling steel coils across the border, said he opposes Canada’s vaccine mandates because governments are marginalizing those who hold different views on vaccination.

“Why is the other side being silenced?” asked Mr. Dyck, who is unvaccinated. He said he has enough fuel in his truck to last a month, and warned that police attempts to remove protesters would backfire. “It will be like throwing gas on a fire,” he said, adding that supporters would flood the scene to stop the police.

Barry Welch, 65, said his daughter and son-in-law have lost their jobs because they don’t want to be vaccinated. The retired teacher said Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is restricting people’s freedom, and he said that is why he turned up to show support for the protesters. “Vaccination should be a personal choice,” he said.

The bridge, one of the busiest border crossings in North America, accommodates roughly 30% of annual two-way U.S.-Canada trade, which recent U.S. data pegs at over \$600 billion. Two-way U.S.-Canada trade of over \$28 billion in motor vehicles and auto parts was transported last year through the Ambassador Bridge, according to Statistics Canada.

Tim Galbraith, sales manager at Cavalier Tool & Manufacturing Ltd. in Windsor, said the company is unable to ship products to the U.S. because 90% of its business is carried by trucks over the Ambassador Bridge. Cavalier makes large injection molds, some weighing as much as 45 tons, for plastic parts used by automotive and other companies. The heavy loads require permits that take time to order and trucking companies are currently reluctant to take orders to other border crossings because of concerns about potential delays or disruptions.

“We have contingency plans for hurricanes and flooding, but man we didn’t have one for the bridge being closed,” he said.

Mr. Dilkens, the Windsor mayor, said Wednesday that the main focus of Windsor police is to de-escalate tension and maintain security. He said the province of Ontario has sent additional police officers, and

	<p>Canada's Public Safety Minister said members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police were en route to Windsor.</p> <p>"We're going to make sure we have the right number of [officers] here to be able to enforce an injunction," Mr. Dilkens said.</p> <p>Both the White House and Bank of Canada Gov. Tiff Macklem expressed concern this week about the impact of prolonged disruption at the Ambassador Bridge. Business groups also fret that the protesters, among them truckers with heavy-duty rigs, could target other trade corridors. Besides the city of Ottawa and the Ambassador Bridge, another Canadian trucker-led protest disrupted cross-border traffic at a point of entry connecting Montana with the oil-producing province of Alberta.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/10 Oakland school closures: a warning sign?
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/oaklands-school-closures-might-be-a-warning-sign-for-california-11644499800?mod=hp_lead_pos12
GIST	<p>Oakland education officials voted to close seven schools following a contentious debate that state officials say could be a harbinger of further cuts as California's student enrollment declines.</p> <p>The Oakland Unified School District board approved the closure plan at around 1 a.m. Wednesday after an eight-hour public meeting that followed more than a week of hunger strikes, walkouts and protests by students, teachers and community members.</p> <p>Oakland Unified Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell said at Tuesday's meeting that the district faced both a "financial crisis and a quality crisis" and that the decision to close schools, while difficult, would help the district remain solvent and invest more in the recruitment and retention of teachers.</p> <p>The Oakland district, which currently enrolls about 33,000 students, has lost more than 20,000 since 2000. That has reduced the district's revenue as state funding is primarily tied to enrollment and attendance.</p> <p>Opponents said the closures would harm students, many racial minorities, who would lose their neighborhood schools.</p> <p>"You all just declared war on us," board member Mike Hutchinson, who was among the minority in the 4-2 vote, said to members who supported the school closures.</p> <p>Oakland is an acute and early example of enrollment declines happening across California that could accelerate in the coming years and strain school district finances. Between the 2014-2015 and 2020-2021 academic years, non-charter public school enrollment in California declined by 378,674 students, or 6.7%, according to state data. The reasons include increasing out-of-state migration, declining birthrates, less affordable housing for families, defections to charter schools and flattening immigration, according to researchers.</p> <p>The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the trend. Public school enrollment was down about 3% in 2020-2021 in both California and the nation.</p> <p>"If other districts don't heed the lesson learned in Oakland, they're going to find themselves in the same situation, but not overnight," said Michael Fine, chief executive of California's Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team, a state agency charged with guiding districts out of financial distress.</p> <p>Over the next decade, student enrollment across California is expected to decline by roughly 9%, according to projections from the state Department of Finance. Los Angeles County, the state's most populous and home to the nation's second largest school district, is projected to experience a 16% decline.</p>

Federal and state [Covid-19 relief funds](#) have helped many districts to forestall belt-tightening decisions, said Candi Clark, associate superintendent of business services for the Office of Education in Alameda County, where Oakland is located.

“It has a tendency to camouflage the true fiscal condition of school districts, especially if they’re declining in enrollment,” Ms. Clark said.

In Oakland, most of the schools slated to close are elementary campuses with fewer than 300 students, a threshold the district says makes them financially unsustainable. Other elementary schools in Oakland have as many as 700 students.

Oakland schools have faced financial problems for decades, some not related to enrollment. A state takeover in 2003 saddled the district with a \$100 million loan that it is still paying back.

Alameda County officials say the Oakland school district needs to make roughly \$90 million in cuts over the next three fiscal years to stay solvent.

The county imposed a Jan. 31 deadline for the district to put forward a plan to balance its budget for the next fiscal year, which led to the school-closure proposal. Some parents felt the process was rushed.

“It’s just unfortunate they made that decision without community engagement,” said Kaitlin Persons, the Black family liaison with Bay Area PLAN, a group that works with parents at public schools.

At Tuesday night’s meeting, which was held online, many said the closures would disproportionately affect children of color, who make up more than 80% of the Oakland school district’s students. According to data from the California Department of Education, 48% of Oakland Unified students are Latino, 22% are Black, 14% are Asian-American or Pacific Islander and 11% are white.

Among the seven schools slated for closure, about 44% of students are Latino and 40% are Black. Every community member who spoke at Tuesday’s meeting opposed the closure plans and many highlighted the impact on minority students.

“Don’t close the schools! Don’t close the Black schools!” two students chanted in unison during their two-minute speaking allotment.

The board voted to close two schools this year and another five next year. Four others will be affected by mergers or grades being eliminated.

“In my opinion, this process is 20 years overdue,” board member Shanthi Gonzales said before the board heard nearly four hours of public comments.

Students affected by the closures will get priority enrollment in choosing a new school in the district.

A last-minute amendment removed seven other schools from the list of those slated to close or merge, including Westlake Middle School, where two teachers have been on a hunger strike for more than a week in protest, sending one to the hospital.

People speaking out on Tuesday night cited problems that moving to a new school can create for single parents or those without cars.

Others blamed charter schools for siphoning off resources. More than 16,000 students are enrolled in Oakland charter schools, which receive public funding but aren’t officially part of the district. In 2000, about 1,000 Oakland students attended charter schools.

	<p>E.L. Cantey, a minister in Oakland, walks his 9-year-old granddaughter and 11-year-old grandson two blocks each morning to Parker K-8 School, which is slated to close after this academic year. Mr. Cantey said that will make it harder for them to get to school.</p> <p>“The kids are so disappointed,” he said.</p> <p>Lakisha Young, the head of Oakland REACH, which works with families in the district, said she is concerned more with Oakland’s educational outcomes than its facilities. Less than a third of Oakland students read at grade level, according to data presented to the board last week, and around a quarter meet math standards.</p> <p>“How do we keep the conversation on making sure those kids have a shot at college?” she asked.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Amazon eases mask rules warehouse staff
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/amazon-is-easing-mask-mandates-for-its-warehouse-staff-11644530431?mod=hp_list_pos2
GIST	<p>Amazon.com Inc. will allow fully vaccinated employees to go maskless inside of its warehouses and is taking steps to adjust its paid time off policies after several states lifted indoor mask mandates this week.</p> <p>The e-commerce giant said in a memo to employees Thursday that the masking policy change would go into effect on Friday. Amazon in December began to require masks for all employees due to the rapid spread of the coronavirus’s Omicron variant. The company earlier had only required staff who weren’t vaccinated to wear masks.</p> <p>Amazon is also taking away Covid-19-related paid leave for employees who aren’t vaccinated. By March 18, workers must have received two doses of the vaccine to receive the paid leave. Amazon in January reduced its isolation period for workers who test positive for Covid-19 to seven days.</p> <p>“There has been a sharp decline in Covid-19 cases across the country over the past weeks. Along with increasing vaccination rates across the country, this is a positive sign we can return to the path to normal operations,” Amazon’s memo says.</p> <p>Officials in states that include New York, Illinois and Massachusetts this week said they would roll back mask mandates or policies that require proof of vaccination for certain activities, steps meant to curb the spread of Covid-19. The changes run counter to current recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and are being made as the pandemic is expected to be a top issue in this year’s midterm elections.</p> <p>Amazon employs about a million workers in the U.S., most at its hundreds of warehouses throughout the country. Some U.S. companies have required all workers and guests at their facilities to get a Covid-19 vaccine, including tech giants such as Microsoft Corp. and Facebook parent Meta Platforms Inc. Amazon hasn’t mandated that its workers get vaccinated, though it has offered incentives for them to do so, such as bonuses.</p> <p>Covid-19 cases have dropped throughout the U.S. after surging late last year and in January. While states are easing mask restrictions, they have yet to do away with them entirely. New York said it would continue to require masks on public transportation and in healthcare settings, and Illinois will continue to require masks in schools.</p> <p>With the paid leave policy change, Amazon has moved closer to an outright vaccine mandate as it navigates disruptions to its delivery operations, which are dependent on the hundreds of thousands of warehouse personnel it employs. Previously, the paid leave time related to the pandemic was available to all employees, regardless of vaccination status.</p>

	<p>The threat of the Omicron variant, which spread quickly throughout the U.S., caused companies to shift procedures around the world in order to keep operating. Many corporations adjusted policies in ways that would cost workers money or impact their benefits if they remained unvaccinated.</p> <p>Delta Air Lines Inc. in August began to charge unvaccinated workers a \$200 monthly health insurance surcharge and said then that employees could lose pay protection for missing work due to the virus. Starbucks Corp. , meanwhile, last month dropped its requirement for U.S. workers to be vaccinated or undergo weekly testing after having earlier mandated vaccinations.</p> <p>Amazon is unique in that it employs both corporate employees in tech as well as hourly warehouse workers. The company’s protocols have evolved as the threat of the virus has shifted and health guidelines have changed.</p> <p>Labor markets have been tight during the past year, causing disruptions for Amazon and other major warehousing companies. Amazon during its fourth quarter spent about \$4 billion in costs related to global supply-chain disruptions and responding to the labor shortage. The Omicron variant, however, arrived as Amazon was wrapping up its peak holiday period, meaning its workforce was less affected than if the variant had arrived earlier.</p> <p>Amazon has responded to the virus aggressively. It was among early employers to send workers home and spent billions testing employees for Covid-19. Lately, it has focused on vaccinations. The company has hosted on-site vaccine clinics and offered employees small bonuses to receive their shots.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Inflation, other woes hit Girl Scout cookies
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/cookie-delays-turn-girl-scouts-into-economics-experts-11644513348?mod=hp_featst_pos5
GIST	<p>Girl Scouts are earning a new badge in global economic turmoil.</p> <p>A month into national cookie-selling season, scouts have felt the effects of supply-chain woes and inflation. Some troops are grappling with shortages of flavors from S’mores to Samoas, plus the occasional angry grown-up customer ticked off about price increases, sometimes from \$4 to \$5 or \$6 per box.</p> <p>The bakery that supplies cookies to 75 out of the 111 geographic areas, or councils, where Girl Scouts sell, is experiencing production delays, the Girl Scouts of the USA says. “We anticipate some councils will be largely unaffected, while other councils and girls may not reach their cookie goals,” the organization said of Little Brownie Bakers, which is based in Louisville, Ky. Little Brownie Bakers didn’t respond to a request for comment.</p> <p>Cookie shortages are undermining fundraising efforts for regional councils that rely on sales of the treats for roughly 70% of their operating revenue, or about \$800 million annually. Each Girl Scout troop decides how to spend its cookie earnings, with the money typically going to Scout activities, charitable projects and financial aid.</p> <p>Girl Scouts of the USA is focused on ensuring the existing supply of cookies is evenly distributed among troops, says communications chief Kelly Parisi. She says the national arm of the organization can’t fill holes in troops’ budgets.</p> <p>Like lots of in-person businesses that went digital in the pandemic, the Girl Scouts took to more cookie selling online when Covid kept them from going door-to-door. Sales remained relatively steady at just under 200 million boxes, the Girl Scouts organization says.</p> <p>Ten-year-old Bailey Laycook set a goal of selling 1,000 boxes this year and has sold 420. She has had to hold off on soliciting sales in person while she waits on more inventory. Cookie season in Los Angeles,</p>

where Bailey lives, runs for only another month. (Cookie season is recognized nationally from January through April, but local timing varies.)

“I’m worried people who have a goal over 700 won’t make it to their goal because of this shortage,” the fifth-grader says. “If the cookies run out, the customers will be waiting.”

Some councils are extending the selling season while waiting on more inventory. For cookie lovers who ask why they can’t order their favorites, Bailey is ready with an explanation: “Sorry, we’ve sold too many that we can’t supply any more. Being the popularest cookies means that they run out way too quickly,” she says.

Bailey’s mother, Ellie Laycook, oversees cookie sales for Bailey’s troop. She says many local distribution centers, also known as “cookie cupboards,” have been struggling to keep up with demand. She recently drove 40 minutes to the one cupboard in the area that had the seven flavors she needed in stock. She snagged some of the last boxes of peanut butter Tagalongs and Samoas.

“There’s been a chain of troop leaders saying, ‘I heard from this other troop leader that you have cookies. Do you have cookies you can spare?’ ” the 36-year-old religious-school director says. So far, her troop has helped five other groups who didn’t have enough to fulfill their orders. “It’s part of the Girl Scout Law,” she says.

Bailey had been trying to push the less-popular cookies she still has in stock such as shortbread Trefoils and Do-si-dos on wary customers. Her strategies: making drawings of the cookies on the sidewalk with an arrow pointing to her stand and having her 6-year-old brother hold a sign that reads “Cookie Crossing.”

“We encourage everyone to try different flavors if their first choice isn’t available, and we appreciate their support of girls’ entrepreneurship,” Girl Scouts of the USA says.

The newest Girl Scout cookie, a brownie-inspired dessert called an Adventureful, has been particularly hard to find. Many troops, including Bailey’s, sold out of all their Adventurefuls in a couple of days. The Girl Scouts organization says new cookies typically sell out quickly due to increased excitement and the difficulty of anticipating demand.

Girl Scouts often earn financial literacy badges during cookie season to sew onto their uniforms, just like they might for good sportsmanship or first-aid skills. One badge, called Cookie CEO, teaches Brownies how to run their own businesses. Another, Cookie Market Researcher, prompts Cadette-level scouts to “investigate what sets your product apart.” A Budgeting badge sponsored by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis asks kids to “Define and give examples of opportunity cost.”

East Rochester, N.Y., troop leader Samantha Cipolla has given her group of 10- and 11-year-olds lessons on inflation to explain why cookies have gotten more expensive.

“It’s insane to watch adults interrogate children about pricing,” the 30-year-old home health aide says of potential buyers hectoring little girls. “We just told them there’s a large demand for cookies and there’s only so many you can sell in a period of time. So when you need more of something, there actually has to be some.”

Her daughter, Lily Cipolla, hasn’t necessarily enjoyed the econ lesson. “It’s boring,” the fifth-grader says.

Cricket Winters, a first-grader in Tallahassee, Fla., says her dad has been teaching her why grocery store shelves are emptier than usual and why she could struggle to meet her goal of selling 600 boxes. “Workers are getting sick and they have to go home and there’s less supply,” she says.

Cricket has been running a stand outside a church since Saturday, when cookie season started. “We have to sell them early so that we have enough,” she says. She accepts cash or Venmo.

HEADLINE	02/10 Afghan refugees in UAE protest conditions
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/afghan-refugees-held-for-months-in-the-u-a-e-protest-the-conditions-11644511778?mod=hp_listb_pos1
GIST	<p>Protests erupted among thousands of Afghan refugees who complain of prisonlike conditions at a facility in Abu Dhabi, where they have been held for months since being evacuated from Afghanistan awaiting resettlement in the U.S.</p> <p>Protests were planned for the coming days, but erupted late Wednesday night after refugees spread the word that Emirati secret police had detained an organizer named Abdul Jalal Kakar, several Afghans at the camp said.</p> <p>The United Arab Emirates said no one was detained, and deferred to the U.S. State Department for further comment. The State Department declined to comment. It later emerged, refugees said, that Mr. Kakar had met with U.S. officials during his absence.</p> <p>Thousands of Afghans stormed out of their quarters after nightfall and gathered outside a U.S. diplomatic office. They were shouting and carrying banners reading, “We want freedom.” A few women marched alongside the men, and children carried signs reading, “Six months life in prison” and “I am suffering mentally.”</p> <p>Following the collapse of the U.S.-backed government in Kabul over the summer, the Biden administration called on allies to host refugees temporarily after their evacuation from Afghanistan. The administration has yet to identify a path for thousands who ended up in third countries and are still waiting to enter the U.S.</p> <p>The protest is likely to add pressure to the already strained discussions between the U.S. and Emirati governments over the future of the camp, which was initially set up to house Afghans for weeks and has now become an indefinite way station for thousands who lack documentation to travel to the U.S.</p> <p>Baktash, a protest organizer who asked to be identified by one name for security reasons, said U.A.E. authorities had been generous in providing food and accommodation, but he criticized the U.S. for leaving them stranded for months in difficult conditions without news on their immigration cases.</p> <p>“We are locked and imprisoned here,” he said. “We are prisoners in our rooms. Our future is not clear.”</p> <p>Around 10,000 Afghans are being held at the tightly secured compound, confined to their residences over what officials have described as concerns about the spread of Covid-19. The refugees have complained of limited access to U.S. immigration officials, education for their children and employment.</p> <p>In Afghanistan, millions are on the brink of starvation after the U.S. and the West—which provided a majority of the funding for the Kabul government, security forces and aid projects—withdrawed financial support along with troops.</p> <p>The Biden administration admitted some 75,000 Afghans who boarded U.S. military flights to the U.S. last year under a temporary status known as humanitarian parole. But officials say the Afghans who remain in third countries have to complete the regular immigration process before entering the U.S., which can take years.</p> <p>Many refugees who served alongside U.S. troops and diplomats have complained that thousands of Afghan with little or no connection to the U.S. were evacuated to the U.S. amid the chaos following the withdrawal, while they remain trapped outside the country.</p> <p>Abdullah Fuladkhail, one of the residents at the camp, is among the thousands of Afghans who applied this summer for a visa program for Afghans at risk of reprisal for working alongside U.S. troops and diplomats. He said he had yet to hear back on whether he would be admitted to the program.</p>

“No one can stop us, there’s too many people, thousands of people,” he said. “We have been waiting six months here. Why haven’t they made any plan for us? The purpose of the protest is to get America’s attention.”

Mr. Fuladkhail said the Taliban shot him in front of his family as they were trying to escape and he needs surgery that is unavailable at the facility.

White House officials this week declined to provide an update on visa processing times but said staffing for the program had quadrupled. Before Kabul collapsed, officials said that wait times had been reduced from several years to close to the mandated nine months.

The Biden administration also recently announced plans to streamline immigration processing in Doha, Qatar, but only expects to use the hub for priority cases including immediate family members of Americans and U.S. permanent residents, former U.S. Embassy staff and unaccompanied children to be reunited with their parents.

The U.A.E. camp is home to thousands of refugees who currently have no legal path to the U.S., including members of paramilitary units backed by the Central Intelligence Agency that helped secure the airport when Kabul fell but weren’t directly employed by U.S. agencies or contractors.

The administration has said that Afghans who don’t fit into certain criteria necessary for entering the U.S. will be transferred to third countries instead. No country has volunteered to take Afghan refugees in limbo, but the U.S. is hoping the European Union or Canada will help.

Beyond the U.A.E., thousands of Afghans are stranded in southeastern European countries such as Albania and Greece, or in other parts of the world, including Uganda, Mexico and Chile.

Recently, a delegation of U.S. officials told camp representatives that thousands of Afghans there may never be admitted to the U.S., adding to the tense situation, camp residents said.

“We repeatedly asked the U.S. Embassy to come and talk to us about why the process is slow and shed light on our future,” said Baktash, the organizer. He said the embassy’s representative told them it could take years to process their paperwork.

“For the rest of the people who are not eligible,” he said, “the U.S. does not have any program, the envoy told us.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/11 US shows foreign policy focus on Asia
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/11/world/asia/blinken-quad-australia.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=US%20Politics
GIST	<p>MELBOURNE, Australia — With Europe bracing for the possibility of its biggest ground war in decades, the American secretary of state, Antony J. Blinken, took a 27-hour flight this week in the opposite direction.</p> <p>On Friday, Mr. Blinken met with the foreign ministers of Australia, Japan and India at a summit in Melbourne of the four-nation coalition called the Quad. His message was clear: Despite crises in Ukraine and elsewhere in the world, the United States is committed to bolstering its presence across Asia and presenting a different vision of the future than the one offered by China.</p> <p>“Countries deserve to have the freedom to work together and associate with whom they choose,” Mr. Blinken said as he stood alongside the other foreign ministers before their meeting on Friday afternoon.</p>

Australia is only the first of three stops for Mr. Blinken, who is also scheduled to meet with foreign officials in Fiji and Hawaii. The weeklong trip to the farthest reaches of Asia and the Pacific shows the intensity with which the Biden administration wants to signal that the vast region is the most important focus of its foreign policy.

In late January, Mr. Blinken had to do [shuttle diplomacy in Kyiv](#) and other European cities to address Russia's aggression toward Ukraine. Since then, President Vladimir V. Putin has continued massing troops along Russia's border with Ukraine for what could be a deadly follow-up to his forceful annexation in 2014 of the Crimean Peninsula and incursion into eastern Ukraine.

While Mr. Blinken and some of his foreign counterparts in Melbourne said they were discussing Russia and Ukraine, that was not the focus of their talks. The Quad, which has gained momentum in recent years after being established in 2007, is an important part of President Biden's vision for countering China, which has a powerful economic presence in every corner of the globe and a growing military footprint in Asia and parts of the Indian Ocean.

Mr. Biden has said he plans to strengthen the traditional alliances and partnerships of the United States and build up new ones. That is a stark contrast to the approach of the Trump administration, which, in its "America First" zeal, created strains with partner countries over issues such as trade and defense funding.

Leaders of the Quad nations have looked at China's actions with growing anxiety in recent years, as Xi Jinping, the leader of the ruling Communist Party, has become more aggressive in his foreign policy.

China has continued to assert its [territorial claims](#) to islands in the East China Sea that are known as the Diaoyu in China and the Senkaku in Japan, which administers the area. Chinese troops have [clashed](#) with the Indian military along the two nations' border in the Himalayas. And Beijing has engaged in what some Western officials call ["influence operations" in Australia](#), including building ties with politicians in the country.

At the same time, all these nations, as well as the United States, have deep economic ties with China, which presents a central dilemma in their relations with the Asian superpower.

On the final leg of the 27-hour flight to Melbourne, after a refueling stop in Pago Pago, American Samoa, Mr. Blinken told reporters that he wanted to emphasize the Biden administration's work with the Quad because the group was "very representative of what we're doing in different ways around the world, which is building, energizing, driving different coalitions of countries focused on sometimes overlapping issues."

That is a common refrain of officials in the Biden administration. In contrast to their predecessors in the Trump administration, they assert that America's strength comes from its alliances and partnerships, and that this approach is more important than ever because of China's enormous economic leverage.

Mr. Blinken's trip "underscores just how important — and how challenging — it is for Washington to maintain focus on the Indo-Pacific," said [Charles Edel](#), Australia chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and a former official in policy planning at the State Department.

"The Quad was formed largely in response to China's increasing use of military and economic coercion, and is meant to prove that democracies can deliver needed public goods across the region. There have been some major successes this year — particularly around vaccine distribution — but now the work, and the success, of the Quad depends on moving from conception phase to coordination and delivery," he added.

Australia, which the United States sees as a model for how smaller nations can stand up to a more aggressive China, has become particularly important to American officials as a cornerstone of the coalition and a regional defense and intelligence partner.

In contrast to European nations, Australia's ties with the United States grew stronger during the Trump administration, and that has continued into the Biden administration. Last September, Mr. Biden

announced a new security pact with Australia and Britain called Aukus and declared that the United States would help Australia [build nuclear-powered submarines](#) — a move that infuriated France, which had a lucrative deal with Australia to supply less-advanced submarines.

Chinese officials [said](#) at the time that the trilateral pact was “extremely irresponsible” and “seriously undermines regional peace and intensifies the arms race.”

On Wednesday, Global Times, a newspaper published by the Communist Party, struck a similar note in [criticizing](#) the meeting of the ministers in Melbourne. “The tone of the four Quad foreign ministers’ meeting scheduled for Friday in Australia is still based on ideological differences and a Cold War mentality,” it said in an article.

On Friday morning, Marise Payne, the Australian foreign minister, drew a sharp line between the influence of the United States in the region and that of China.

She said at the start of a meeting with Mr. Blinken that “more than one authoritarian regime is presenting itself in the current world climate as a challenge — the D.P.R.K., China as well.” Ms. Payne was using the formal name for North Korea, an ally of China that has conducted an alarming number of [missile tests](#) in recent weeks.

“We strongly support U.S. leadership on those challenges,” she added.

When the leaders of the Quad nations met in Washington last September for their first ever in-person meeting, the nations issued a [communiqué](#) that listed seven broad areas of cooperation: Covid-19 and global health aid, infrastructure, climate change, people-to-people exchange and education, emerging technologies, cybersecurity and outer space.

The leaders had already said at a virtual summit in March that they would work together on delivering Covid-19 vaccines, and in September they said the goal was to donate 1.2 billion doses of vaccines worldwide, in addition to their commitments to a World Health Organization vaccine program. At the time, they said they had delivered nearly 79 million doses in the Asia-Pacific region.

“I think the most important thing is to maintain a sense of momentum on those topics,” said [Susannah Patton](#), a research fellow and project director in the Power and Diplomacy Program at the Lowy Institute in Sydney, Australia.

Ms. Patton said that Australia saw the Quad as further integrating the United States into a strategic role in the region and committing it to continuing what President Barack Obama called a “pivot to Asia,” away from the long-running and costly wars of the Middle East and Central Asia.

However, she said it was important that Washington come up with a comprehensive plan for economic engagement in the Asia-Pacific region. Mr. Obama had intended for the proposed 12-nation trade pact called the [Trans-Pacific Partnership](#) to do that, but President Donald J. Trump blocked any American role in the agreement. And within the Democratic Party, Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren and other progressive politicians had denounced the pact, saying it would harm American workers.

Mr. Obama and Mr. Biden, when he was vice president, argued that the pact would help raise environmental and labor standards across Asia and give the member nations alternative trading partners to China, which had not been a founding member.

Last September, with the United States absent from the trade agreement, China [applied](#) to join.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/11 Cleaning up from coronavirus to take years
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/11/americans-will-be-cleaning-up-from-the-coronavirus/

Americans are eager for a post-omicron lull in the pandemic, but experts warn that the coronavirus isn't finished.

New variants aside, the pandemic over the past two years has carved scars across society that the country hasn't begun to face.

"We're a little bit like that zebra that's in the jaws of the crocodile and is stunned and limp and doesn't quite grasp what has happened to it," said Nicholas Christakis, a doctor and social scientist at Yale University. "People don't yet fully grasp the magnitude of what has happened to us."

Some changes are palpable. Nearly 1 million Americans have died from COVID-19, and hundreds of thousands fewer babies have been born during the pandemic. The Census Bureau says the population is growing at the slowest pace since the country's founding.

The economy has shifted in radical ways, and it's not clear where it will end up, but millions of people are staying out of the workforce for now.

Some ramifications are less obvious.

In addition to the dead, scientists say millions more survived COVID-19 but developed disabilities such as cardiac problems, damaged lungs or weakened kidneys. Scientific American said medical professionals expect to be dealing with a "tsunami of disability" for years.

Even those who weren't personally struck by the virus have undergone changes.

Younger children have never had a normal school year. Masks and dividers between desks have robbed them of the kinds of encounters that build resilience, negotiating skills and basic social understanding.

The office watercooler as a kibitzing point is gone, at least for now. Daily run-ins with friends and colleagues have to be scheduled or don't happen at all. Meetings at coffee shops have been replaced with Zoom sessions.

Social distancing, initially a medical prescription for slowing the spread of COVID-19, has become its own epidemic.

"It's like a new cubicle. Your cubicle now is your house, but nobody's going to pop over the wall and say, 'You want to have lunch?'" said Allen Furr, an emeritus professor of sociology, anthropology and social work at Auburn University.

Cleaning up

Dr. Christakis, whose book "Apollo's Arrow" chronicles the country's early struggles and successes during the pandemic, figures on three phases. The first stage, when the virus rages, is winding down.

Later this year, he said, the country will enter the intermediate stage with the virus becoming endemic. Most everyone will have contracted COVID-19 or been vaccinated, acquiring some immunity.

Barring a devastating new virus variant that is more deadly or better able to evade vaccines, COVID-19 will become "a background killer" like the flu. U.S. deaths from COVID-19 will drop from about 2,500 a day to an average of 50 to 100 — about the same as the flu.

In 2024 or so, Dr. Christakis said, the postpandemic stage will dawn. He said it will be "a little bit of a party."

"When the war is over, when the famine is done, when the earthquake stops, when the pandemic ends, people rejoice. The survivors rejoice," he said.

Until then, he said, the country faces a reckoning: “During the next phase, it’s like the waters of the tsunami have receded, and now we’ve got to clean up.”

The \$6 trillion or so added to the national debt will have to be paid off. That likely means higher inflation, which will hit Americans’ wallets.

The nation already is seeing some of that, with inflation hitting 40-year highs, as well as other economic aftershocks.

The Great Resignation has forced companies to rethink wages, benefits and working conditions to keep or lure back employees.

That hasn’t been enough for millions of workers. The workforce participation rate, which ticked up in the Trump years, fell 3 percentage points in the first several months of the pandemic, affecting millions of people. It has rebounded somewhat but is still 1.5 points lower than prepandemic levels.

Some older workers retired earlier than expected. Others are parents, usually women, who ditched jobs to deal with children out of school or to take care of ailing parents.

“A lot of people left the labor market, and they’re not going to come back,” Bank of America CEO Brian Moynihan said at an event hosted by the World Economic Forum and Fortune.

Analysts are tracking not only the rise in mortality but also a significant birth dearth as women’s fertility rates plummet to record lows.

The long-term prospects are not clear. Some projections show a lasting deficit sapping the economy of workers. Others, including the folks at the Social Security Administration, say it’s just a blip and women will make up for the lost babies in the next few years.

Then there’s the massive loss of trust in institutions — and in one another. Masking and vaccine status have become political dividing lines.

“I’m ashamed of us as a nation right now. We have not come together as a people to confront this external threat,” Dr. Christakis said. “I think people should communicate their political identity by using bumper stickers or lawn signs, not by whether they wear a mask or get a vaccine.”

Social headwinds

Measuring softer changes, such as interpersonal interactions, is tougher. Some indicators, such as Google’s “mobility trends,” track where Americans have been spending their time during the pandemic.

At the height of lockdowns in spring 2020, people were spending 50% less time at their workplaces. Some are returning to the office two years in, but Americans are spending about 20% less time at work — even in red states, where pandemic defiance is high.

Transit use has taken a nosedive, and visits to retail and recreation spots are still below normal.

Meanwhile, time spent at home is up, according to Google’s numbers.

The Census Bureau, which has been keeping tabs on Americans during the pandemic, said the number of people who “sometimes” or “often” don’t have enough to eat has nearly doubled.

About a third of the country is experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder. That is nearly three times the prepandemic rate of about 11%, though it has improved since late 2020, when more than 40% reported symptoms.

Parenting message boards crackle with debate over whether masking in day care centers and schools has sapped primary school students of nonverbal cues for learning and left toddlers slower to speak.

Research suggests that some babies born during the pandemic also struggle with motor skills. The reasons aren't clear.

Other studies indicate that childhood obesity has increased.

The headwinds add up.

"Kids are missing out on a lot of important developmental tasks they should be going through," Mr. Furr said. "They're just not having as many opportunities. These are things like problem-solving, learning to deal with other people, learning to deal with organizations like schools."

The debates about school are microcosms of the larger fights rending the country over masking, vaccine mandates and whether the social costs of distancing are greater than the disease.

What is and what may never be

The pandemic gave the world a sense of how intrusive people have become.

Global greenhouse gas emissions dropped as humanity shut down activities, though people were pumping out carbon and methane at nearly the same rate as before the pandemic by the end of 2020.

Despite the carbon holiday, which scientists dubbed the "anthropause," researchers at the California Institute of Technology found that concentration levels in the atmosphere rose as if emissions hadn't dropped.

Lockdowns emptied city streets of people, and wildlife crept in.

Fewer cars meant less roadkill. Nitrogen dioxide, a key air pollutant from sources such as power plants and vehicles, also dropped.

Curiously, fewer people on the roads meant more chaos, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said. Traffic deaths rose 7% in 2020.

Even though people logged fewer miles behind the wheel, they were driving more recklessly, police say.

Emerging from the pandemic traffic lull didn't seem to help. Americans increased their miles on the road in early 2021, and traffic deaths soared. NHTSA recorded the largest-ever increase in fatalities during the first half of 2021.

Some pandemic predictions await final judgment. President Trump, for example, wondered whether the handshake would disappear as the standard greeting in the West.

Debates over globalization and the costs and benefits of worldwide supply chains are still raging.

A recent post on Reddit, a major social media site, asked people to share something COVID-19 had taken away that won't be coming back.

Among the mentions were lost parents, closures of favorite bars and restaurants, upheaval in the economy and the workplace, and losses of faith in institutions.

Asthma sufferers said a simple cough on the street, which used to elicit little reaction, now sends people scurrying like a gunshot.

Others reported diminishing lines between public and private time. If schooling can be accomplished virtually at home, then there is no reason for sick days or snow days. If work can be done at home, then there is no such thing as downtime or sick days. Any hour can be a work hour.

Some reported lost connections: less time with a new niece or an aging parent, or a tougher time connecting with friends. Indeed, lost time seemed to be a common thread.

Robbie Samuels sees a bright side to the reshaping of social interactions. The self-described extrovert, who works as a networking expert helping companies develop online events, said virtual space has given him more chances to have meaningful relationships.

“I have met more people and formed deeper relationships since March 2020 than I did the five years prior,” he said.

In fact, he said, he attended an in-person event late last year in New York and found it to be taxing in surprising ways. He ended up feeling “oversocialized.”

Figuring out how to reengage in person will be a challenge for many.

Mr. Samuels said he hopes folks don’t leap back into society without stopping to ponder the trade-offs. Scheduling interactions during the pandemic has made them more intentional, and he said that’s worth keeping.

“Two years from now, I’m going to be going to more in-person things, but I’m going to be more thoughtful about what I choose to leave the house for,” he said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Audit: IRS lost \$400M to broken machines
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/10/irs-lost-more-400-million-because-broken-mail-mach/
GIST	<p>The IRS cost the government more than \$400 million over the last three years because it didn’t bother to fix broken mail machines, the agency’s inspector general said in a new report Thursday.</p> <p>The machines are supposed to automatically identify which envelopes contain payments to Uncle Sam, so they can be quickly processed and deposited.</p> <p>But the 20-year-old machines are in such disrepair that they kept missing envelopes with remitted payments. Employees shut them off and resorted to looking for payments by hand — a much slower process.</p> <p>The delays meant checks were deposited more slowly, costing the government hundreds of millions of dollars in lost interest payments, the inspector general said.</p> <p>From Jan. 1, 2019, to June 3, 2021 — less than two and a half years — the broken IRS machines cost the government nearly half a billion dollars, the audit concluded.</p> <p>The figure in 2020 was particularly high because it coincided with fewer employees working the line because of the pandemic. But even in 2021, the losses averaged more than \$10 million a month.</p> <p>Investigators said the machines, known as the Service Center Automated Mail Processing System, or SCAMPS, are the “cornerstone” of the IRS’s system for processing tax returns.</p> <p>“However, SCAMPS equipment in place at these sites is 20 years old and has not had any significant technical upgrades in more than 15 years,” the audit said.</p>

Replacing the machines would cost \$650,000, while a total rebuild could be done for about \$365,000 — either of which would be a massive savings.

In addition to spotting envelopes with checks, SCAMPS can also automatically open the envelopes — another time-saving device.

But the machines are a mess.

From January to March last year, SCAMPS machines had to be serviced nearly 300 times, the audit reported.

And when investigators showed up for a review in Kansas City, they counted at least five jams in less than 15 minutes. Employees told investigators the machines were so old that they couldn't get new parts to fix the problem.

It took the inspector general's warning to get the IRS to buy new upgrades, the audit said.

SCAMPS also had the unfortunate habit of not just slicing the envelope, but also cutting the correspondence inside.

IRS employees were left to try to stitch the papers back together with tape, the inspector general said.

"When we brought our concern to management's attention, they responded that some cut or sliced mail is unwelcome but an inevitable result of mechanical operation," investigators said.

The IRS did eventually say that replacing SCAMPS is a priority but that the process will take a long time because of procurement rules.

"We will take the actions necessary for the evaluation and purchase of a replacement for the equipment used for opening and sorting mail," Kenneth C. Corbin, commissioner of the IRS's wage and investment division, wrote in an official reply to the inspector general.

He also disputed the inspector general's calculation of interest money lost because of the delays, saying there are other factors involved. He did not offer his own estimate of losses.

Mr. Corbin set a deadline of Dec. 15, 2024, for replacing the machines — nearly three years from now.

At a rate of \$10 million wasted each month, that could result in more than \$350 million more in cash lost to Uncle Sam over a \$600,000 piece of equipment.

To be sure, those losses are slim compared to the IRS's total workload.

It expects to collect \$3.5 trillion this year.

But the lost money is another black eye for an agency that has struggled with embarrassing hiccups dating back to the tea party targeting scandal in the Obama years.

More recently the agency was forced to backtrack on plans to make customers submit to facial recognition technology to conduct some business on the IRS website.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 US approves fighter jet deal for Indonesia
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/10/state-department-oks-f-15id-fighter-jet-deal-indon/
GIST	The State Department signed off on an agreement to sell Indonesia up to 36 F-15ID fighters and related equipment in a deal worth almost \$14 billion.

	<p>The Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) has notified Congress of the possible sale, Pentagon officials said Thursday.</p> <p>The package also includes 87 engines, along with radars, computers, navigation systems and security devices for the advanced fighter jets, officials said. Boeing will be the principal contractor for the deal, officials said.</p> <p>Late last year, Jakarta signaled its intention to focus future jet fighter purchases on the next-generation F-15 or Dassault Aviation's Rafale fighter, instead of the Russia Sukhoi-35.</p> <p>Indonesia will play a large role in any scenario involving a rapidly expanding China, which claims large sections of the South China Sea and is considered the U.S.'s most significant "pacing challenge" in the Indo-Pacific theater.</p> <p>"The proposed sale will support the foreign policy goals and national security objectives of the United States by improving the security of an important regional partner that is a force for political stability and economic progress in the Asia-Pacific region," Pentagon officials said in a statement. "It is vital to U.S. national interests to assist Indonesia in developing and maintaining a strong and effective self-defense capability."</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/09 Experts warn: too soon rollback mask rules
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/09/us-mask-mandates-covid-omicron-democrats-cdc
GIST	<p>Several US states, many of them governed by Democrats, began rolling back mask mandates this week, a move public health experts warn could set back progress battling Covid.</p> <p>On Wednesday, Massachusetts, Illinois, New York and Rhode Island joined California, Connecticut, Delaware, New Jersey and Oregon in lifting mask mandates for some public places.</p> <p>The wave of relaxations comes after months of private meetings among state leaders and political focus groups after the November elections, according to reports. "Now, it's time to give people their lives back," Sean Maloney, chair of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, tweeted in support of New York suspending its indoor mask-or-vaccine mandate.</p> <p>Yet the lifting of rules has not been universally applauded and is coming at a time when the vast majority of the country (99%) is still seeing high transmission of the virus, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Public polls show consistent support for mask mandates and other precautions, and experts say the time to relax precautions is not here yet – and acting prematurely could prolong this wave.</p> <p>"In my view, it's too soon. I feel like we're anticipating too much," said Justin Lessler, a professor of epidemiology at the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health. "We're being too confident that things are going to keep going the direction that they have been going."</p> <p>The CDC's director, Rochelle Walensky, also recently said that "now is not the moment" to drop masks in public, although the agency is reportedly weighing changes to its guidance on masks.</p> <p>While Covid cases have dropped from Omicron's record-shattering peak, the US still has an average of more than 230,000 cases each day – similar to the height of last winter's wave – and more than 2,300 people are dying from Covid each day, according to the CDC. While hospitalizations are beginning to fall, 80% of hospitals are still under "high or extreme stress".</p>

Treatments, including [antivirals and monoclonal antibodies](#), that keep Covid from progressing to serious illness and death are still in short supply throughout the country. Children under the age of five are not yet eligible for vaccines, while less than a quarter of kids ages five to 11 are fully vaccinated.

“We have hundreds of thousands of people dying, we have millions who’ve been hospitalized and we have an unknown number who have long Covid and who will get long Covid as we roll back what little mitigation we have,” said Julia Raifman, assistant professor at Boston University School of Public Health and creator of the Covid-19 US state policy database.

“Saying things are normal undercuts us in getting more people vaccinated and in helping people wear masks, because transmission actually remains quite high,” Raifman said. “The best way to help people think things are more normal is to reduce the amount of virus with the mitigation measures that we have.”

The failure to set measures on when to drop or reinstate precautions “starts from the top”, including the CDC and the White House, Raifman said. “The whole of the pandemic response is being mismanaged, and only better leadership can help us come together to better address it.”

Anthony Fauci, the president’s chief medical adviser, [says](#) the US is leaving the “full-blown” phase of the pandemic. In September, he said controlling the pandemic meant having [fewer than 10,000 cases a day](#).

“This is not a declaration of victory as much as an acknowledgment that we can responsibly live with this thing,” [said](#) the New Jersey governor, Phil Murphy, who is also a key leader of the National Governors Association. Governors have reportedly [urged](#) Biden to “move away from the pandemic”.

Many states – including Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, Oregon, New Jersey and Rhode Island – are also set to lift school mask mandates. California is considering changes to the rules on school masks, while Illinois and New York will keep theirs for now. The governor of Pennsylvania lifted the school mask rule last month.

Teachers’ unions have joined health experts in calling for science-based recommendations in order to keep educators and students safe, and to keep the virus from forcing further school closures caused by worker shortages.

“I worry about taking off measures just because cases are trending down,” Lessler said. “At least some of the rate of decrease has to do with what little we’re doing to try to control transmission, and by stopping these measures – both directly and in the message it sends about the risk of the virus – you slow that down-trend.”

A new variant could also emerge and change the situation yet again, he said. “We’ve time and time again been surprised by new variants.”

Lifting measures too early and slowing the decrease in cases can result in “a lot of unnecessary cases and deaths that you might have avoided simply by waiting a few weeks”, Lessler said.

“And if we change what we’re doing substantially, we may not get there, or it may take us longer to get there than anticipated.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Substitute teachers in short supply
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/10/covid-us-substitute-teachers-shortage
GIST	Henry Leckenby, 54, recalls a feeling of scarcity when he first started working as a substitute teacher. Each morning, he jumped on the computer first thing to see which assignments were open that day. Now, he has his pick of jobs he wants to take and schools he wants to work in.

“I’ve gotten the impression that every single day I wake up, I have work if I want it. The other day there were literally at least a couple dozen openings,” he said.

Leckenby, who lives in La Crosse, Wisconsin, has a PhD in physics, but found it difficult to find work after a university job dried up.

“‘Overqualified’ is a word I heard a lot,” he said. But substitute teaching offered a flexible schedule that fit his needs and he’s been doing it ever since.

Substitute teachers like Leckenby suddenly find themselves on the winning end of a supply-and-demand problem facing schools across the country: Too few full-time teachers, and not enough substitute teachers to cover for them.

As the Omicron variant hurtled across the nation, political leaders from the White House to local school boards faced intense pressure to keep open brick-and-mortar schools – and most have.

“Let’s put it in perspective: 95%, as high as 98%, of the schools in America are open, functioning and capable of doing the job,” president [Joe Biden said](#) at a press conference last month. He urged school districts to use funding to keep schools open.

But that reality has left the nation’s public schools scrambling to fill holes created by a lack of available teachers to fill vacancies. And it’s created a cascade of day-to-day disruptions within school buildings as staff chip in to cover for absent colleagues, leaving some assigned duties aside in the process.

[Research has shown](#) teacher absences have a detrimental impact on student learning, which could compound the learning loss caused by ongoing disruptions in education over the past two years.

States have taken a variety of measures in a desperate rush to solve the problem – from lowering entrance requirements and increasing pay to [more drastic measures](#).

Oklahoma governor Kevin Stitt issued an executive order last month that permits state agencies to allow their workers to work as substitutes while keeping their regular pay. That brought uniformed police officers into schools – to [lead classroom instruction](#).

Meanwhile, New Mexico’s governor Michelle Lujan Grisham called on state workers and members of the National Guard to volunteer for classroom duty. By early February, [at least 78 members](#) of New Mexico’s National Guard reported for classroom duty.

In Austin, Texas, 400 employees from the school district’s central office have chipped in to work as substitute teachers, the district said last month. So did [a county judge](#).

‘A double hit’

Beneath the immediate need for substitutes is a shortage of full-time teachers that predates the pandemic. But data indicates that Covid may have hastened some teachers’ departures from the field.

In July 2020, in the months that followed Covid’s arrival, the seasonally adjusted rate of workers who quit state and local public education jobs reached [1.5% – a 20-year-high](#), according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. By the following summer, however, the quit-rate had fallen to a record low of 0.3%. And by December, the quit-rate was on par with similar government jobs.

Some who resigned from education jobs may have been lured by higher pay and a better work-life balance [offered in the private sector](#).

But Peggy Wirtz-Olsen, president of the Wisconsin Education Association Council, said others have been driven away by the challenging conditions teachers have long endured.

“It’s been a double hit, with the absences caused by the pandemic plus an alarming number of teachers leaving the profession due to unrealistic workloads, low pay, and a lack of input in school decisions. All of that exacerbates the situation we find ourselves in right now,” said Wirtz-Olsen.

And with remaining teachers out sick for longer periods of time this year, finding enough substitutes has presented an acute challenge.

More than three-quarters of school leaders have struggled to find substitute teachers, according to a nationally representative survey conducted in the early weeks of the school year by EdWeek Research Center. Before the pandemic, schools nationally were able to fill about 80% of teacher absences, while this year it may be closer to 50% or 60%, [EdWeek reported](#).

And in California, the nation’s most populous state, fewer people are applying for permits to become substitute teachers than before Covid arrived.

Between 2019 and 2020, the number of people applying for permits to work as substitute teachers dropped by 25%, according data from the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing. While applications rebounded in 2021, they were still 87% of pre-pandemic numbers.

In Wisconsin, Wirtz-Olsen said the current challenges underscore the need to improve working conditions both to recruit and retain full-time teachers as well as the high-quality substitutes they depend on. The alternative would mean further disruptions to student learning.

“The constant need to step in and cover for others is putting additional stress on an already stretched system – both on educators and our support professionals in buildings who are increasingly asked to cover,” she said. “And for the student experience, that disruption is causing a lack of consistency from day to day.”

In Milwaukee, Wisconsin’s largest school district, full-time elementary school teacher Angela Harris said she doesn’t remember seeing a substitute teacher in her school all year, despite staff being out sick. More often, paraprofessionals or other support staff will step in to cover for absent teachers, she said. She worries about the loss of routine and what it means for students.

“It’s been a revolving door for our students, and I’ve seen the ripple effects across my school,” Harris said.

“There were disparities that already existed, and Covid-19 has just exposed those gaps and made them even worse,” she said.

‘I’ve been deeply alarmed’

Despite the demands and potential risks, many still find in substitute teaching the flexibility that fits their needs. That’s true even for some teachers who are at heightened risk of complications from Covid.

Linda Carter, 70, works as a substitute teacher in Lee County, Florida. Because a paralyzed nerve in her diaphragm left her lung useless, she wears a non-invasive ventilator to help her breathe 18 hours a day. Carter relies on augmented voice technology to deliver instruction, feeding her lesson plans into the software in advance, then letting the electronic voice take the lead in the classroom.

“I just push one of my buttons and it will tell the students what they need to do, provided they stay quiet and follow instructions,” Carter said. “I teach hi-tech.”

Carter, who serves as the treasurer for the National Substitute Teachers Alliance, said she finds the work deeply rewarding and has no plans to leave the classroom anytime soon. But she can’t say the same for all of the substitute teachers she knows, many of whom are retired educators who’ve left the job out of concern about contracting and spreading Covid.

	<p>Currently, at least eight states, including Florida, have banned school districts from issuing universal mask mandates.</p> <p>“A lot of teachers have decided to hang it up because it’s not worth the risk, and I think it’s the same around the country,” Carter said.</p> <p>In La Crosse, the crunch to find substitute teachers has meant better pay for Leckenby. He’s seen an increase from around \$120 a day when he first started, to around \$140 today.</p> <p>Still, fear of Covid lingers. Leckenby’s wife works with vulnerable populations. And at 54, he worries about the complications Covid could cause for him.</p> <p>“I haven’t been scared away. But there have been times I’ve been deeply alarmed,” he said.</p> <p>“With substitute teaching, there are no benefits. So if I test positive or get sick, that’s at least five days where I’m just out of work. You’re looking at several hundred dollars that could just disappear,” he said.</p> <p>That’s why, in addition to being vaccinated, boosted and wearing an N95 mask, Leckenby chooses to work only in school districts he knows take masking and mitigation strategies seriously.</p> <p>“Thankfully, there are some school districts that have mask policies and actually enforce them,” he said. “If there weren’t, it would be a lot more difficult to continue to do this work.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/11 Ukraine talks in Berlin fail
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/11/things-could-go-crazy-quickly-biden-warns-on-ukraine-as-talks-in-berlin-fail
GIST	<p>US president Joe Biden has warned that “things could go crazy quickly” in Ukraine and again urged American citizens to leave immediately, as the UK’s defence secretary headed to Moscow in the latest round of diplomacy.</p> <p>“American citizens should leave, should leave now,” Biden said in an interview with NBC News. “We’re dealing with one of the largest armies in the world. This is a very different situation and things could go crazy quickly.”</p> <p>On Friday, UK defence secretary Ben Wallace joins foreign secretary Liz Truss in Moscow after she held frosty talks with her Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov. Lavrov said the meeting was like a conversation of “the mute with the deaf”. Wallace will reportedly tell Sergei Shoigu, the Russian defence minister, that invading Ukraine would be a “lose-lose” situation.</p> <p>The diplomatic manoeuvring came as Russia-Ukraine relations soured further. On Thursday Ukraine’s foreign ministry accused Moscow of showing a “blatant disregard for the rules and principles of international law” by planning missile tests in the Black Sea that Kyiv says will make shipping navigation impossible there and in the Sea of Azov. Russia has just started 10 days of drills with Belarusian forces.</p> <p>In Berlin on Thursday night, Russia and Ukraine said they had failed to reach any breakthrough in a day of related talks with French and German officials aimed at ending an eight-year separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine.</p> <p>It had not been possible to “overcome” Russia and Ukraine’s different interpretations of the 2015 Minsk agreement aimed at ending fighting between pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian government forces, said Russian envoy Dmitry Kozak.</p> <p>His Ukrainian counterpart, Andriy Yermak, said both sides agreed to keep talking. “I hope that we will meet again very soon and continue these negotiations. Everyone is determined to achieve a result,” he said.</p>

The conflict in the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk regions, known together as the Donbas, simmers despite a notional ceasefire.

Military analysts estimate Moscow has massed more than 135,000 troops on the borders of Ukraine, both in Russia and in Belarus – and some now believe nearly all the necessary elements are in place if Putin wanted to attack.

In his interview, Biden reiterated that under no circumstances would he send US troops to Ukraine, even to rescue Americans in case of a Russian invasion. “That’s a world war. When Americans and Russians start shooting one another, we’re in a very different world,” he said.

“What I’m hoping is that if [Russian president Vladimir Putin] is foolish enough to go in, he’s smart enough not to in fact do anything that would negatively impact American citizens.”

During a visit to Nato’s headquarters on Thursday, Boris Johnson said the Ukraine crisis had entered “the most dangerous moment” as Russian forces continued their military buildup on the borders of its southern neighbour.

The UK prime minister said “our intelligence remains grim” but told reporters in Brussels that he didn’t think a decision has yet been taken by Putin to order an invasion.

“This is probably the most dangerous moment. I would say that in the course of the next few days, in what is the biggest security crisis that Europe has faced for decades, we’ve got to get it right,” Johnson said.

But he made it clear that Britain could not intervene militarily if Ukraine was attacked. Speaking later at a military base in Warsaw, he said: “The UK has been supplying some defensive weaponry in the form of anti-tank missiles, we have been training Ukrainian troops. That is as far as we can go at the moment.”

The conclusion of Johnson’s whirlwind European trip took place at Warsaw’s presidential palace, where he was greeted by Polish president Andrzej Duda.

They exchanged warm words, with the prime minister repeating that Britain stands “shoulder to shoulder” with Poland and its eastern Nato allies.

The UK has put 1,000 troops on standby in case of a humanitarian crisis in the east if the current Russian military buildup leads to war, and 350 Royal Marines arrived in Poland to coincide with Johnson’s visit.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Canada truckers protesters: police uneasy
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/10/canada-truckers-protest-mindset-intelligence-reports
GIST	<p>Leaders of the Ottawa “Freedom Convoy” protest have warned fellow protesters that the risk of violence is growing, amid speculation the police may move to disperse the nearly two-week occupation of Canada’s capital.</p> <p>Daily “intelligence reports” compiled by protest leaders and seen by the Guardian – as well as public comments by the organisers – have grown increasingly alarmist in recent days. While the reports include misinformation, and should not be taken as credible intelligence, they nevertheless offer an insight on the occupiers’ conspiratorial mindset.</p> <p>Thursday’s report warns that “the Office of the Prime Minister (PMO) has directed that Freedom Convoy 2022 be dispersed by not [sic] later that [sic] Saturday, 12 February 2022.”</p> <p>In Canada, politicians cannot direct police operations, but the increasing paranoia of the protesters present a worrying change in tone.</p>

The reports are prepared by Tom Quiggin, a private security consultant [who has previously been accused of spreading misinformation](#), particularly by overplaying the threat of terrorism posed by Canada's Muslim community.

Roughly 1,000 people have blockaded downtown Ottawa since late January, demanding an end to all Covid vaccine mandates. Some are calling for Justin Trudeau to step down as prime minister or be removed from office.

They say their occupation will continue until their demands are met, and other protesters have since [blocked the international Ambassador Bridge between Detroit and Windsor](#), Ontario, and two smaller border crossings.

It is not clear how widely these reports are shared, but they accurately reflect the public talking points of the lead organizers.

Police near the Ambassador Bridge have begun receiving additional manpower, Drew Dilkens, mayor of Windsor, told CNN on Thursday, and the city was seeking an injunction from Ontario superior court to have the protesters removed.

"[If] the protesters don't leave, there will have to be a path forward. If that means physically removing them, that means physically removing them, and we're prepared to do that," Dilkens said.

However he later added he was striving to resolve the issue peacefully and ensure nobody was hurt. "It may be gratifying for someone to see the forced removal of the demonstrators, [but] such action may inflame the situation and certainly cause more folks to come here and add to the protest, and we don't want to risk additional conflict," Dilkens said.

General Motors Co and Chrysler-parent Stellantis said on Thursday they had to cancel or reduce shifts because of parts shortages, adding to earlier cuts announced by Ford and Toyota. Toyota said it was suspending production until Saturday at plants in Ontario and Kentucky.

The protesters' reports portray the city's police chief, Peter Sloly, as an antagonist, saying that he "has played a role in creating a political space where violence can occur".

Earlier this week Tom Marazzo, a protest leader who is described as a "police liaison", said that "the statements and actions by the Chief of Police have deliberately set the conditions for potential violence against the peaceful protesters."

The protesters insist that they are entirely peaceful, but they have resisted attempts to clear them from downtown and stop them resupplying with diesel. Local residents complain that life in the city has been made intolerable by the occupiers' blaring truck horns and nightly fireworks.

"Our city is under siege," said Councillor Diane Deans, who described the protests as a "nationwide insurrection".

Ottawa police say they have made 23 arrests since the occupation began, which includes resistant arrest and breach of probation – another 85 criminal investigations are ongoing.

Protesters gather near the parliament hill as truckers continue to protest in Ottawa.

5G and QAnon: how conspiracy theorists steered Canada's anti-vaccine trucker protest

Read more

Efforts to clear the occupiers have been complicated by their extensive physical infrastructure – including wooden shelters and hundreds of trucks – and the presence of children in about 100 vehicles, police say.

Officers have also warned that some protesters are believed to have firearms. "We've been worried about how tooled up these guys are," said a source who has been part of the city's emergency response.

The protest leaders' reports and public comments make it clear that the occupiers will resist police attempts to move them.

In a video posted online, one of the organizers told protesters to lock themselves in their trucks if the police move in. "Guys, lock that door. Crawl into that bunk. But before you do that, grab that horn switch and don't let go let that fucking horn go, no matter what time it is, and let it roll as long as possible until they're busting your fucking windows down," said Chris Barber.

In one report, Quiggin claims that "police forces are increasingly uneasy with their role" echoing a view among protesters that – unlike the upper echelons of the Ottawa police and Royal Canadian Mounted Police – frontline officers are sympathetic to their cause.

In contrast, the report accuses Soly and other senior officers of being aligned with "corporate power structures".

That mentality may embolden the protesters to stand their ground.

"There has been a pervasive narrative in this movement that any violence is not the fault of the protesters, but instead instigated by 'Antifa' ... or orchestrated by the deep state," said Stephanie Carvin, a Carleton University professor and former intelligence analyst. "In my view, this is entirely consistent with that narrative."

Quiggin's reports also reveal the intensely conspiratorial nature of the occupation.

Protesters have made constant allusions to a conspiracy theory which holds that the World Economic Forum is seeking to use the Covid pandemic to stage a "Great Reset", which would purportedly create a "Marxian-inspired totalitarian system". Many proponents of this conspiracy theory blame the Forum for creating Covid-19 itself.

On Thursday, Quiggin's daily intelligence report provided a "a partial list of Canadian officials who are members of the World Economic Forum", including Trudeau, several members of his cabinet, two Conservative members of parliament and a host of other government and civil society officials.

One MP on the list told the Guardian that in recent days they had received a significant increase and worrying rise in harassment and abuse mentioning the World Economic Forum.

The Ottawa police force and Royal Canadian Mounted Police did not respond to requests for comment.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 States end mandates; schools must decide
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/us/school-mask-mandates.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article
GIST	<p>David Fleishman, the superintendent of schools in Newton, Mass., an affluent Boston suburb, said he recently received a message from a parent who pushed for ending mask mandates in classrooms.</p> <p>But first, he said, the individual felt the need to assure him, "I am not a Trump supporter."</p> <p>While Newton, like much of Massachusetts, is mostly liberal and Democratic, Mr. Fleishman said that when it comes to masks, "there's this tension."</p> <p>The battle over mask mandates may be moving to liberal-leaning communities that had been largely in agreement on the need for masking — and bound by statewide mask requirements.</p>

Now that Massachusetts will lift its school mask mandate on Feb. 28, joining other liberal states like New Jersey and Connecticut, it will be up to individual school districts like Newton, and nearby Boston, to decide whether and how quickly they want to rescind their own mask rules.

They will do so under a barrage of conflicting public health guidance, with Ivy League, government and medical experts offering competing advice.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Academy of Pediatrics continue to call for school masking, and some polls show that the public is broadly supportive of the practice.

But a well-organized chorus of public health and child development experts, alongside parent activists, say that masking can hurt children academically and socially, and are calling for the return to a semblance of normalcy.

Newton and Boston, about 10 miles apart, give an idea of how two politically liberal and cautious districts are approaching the choice — and how and why they may come to different decisions. The debate will involve science, but also politics, race and class, as well as a swell of emotions.

Some see masking as a potent health tool and a symbol of progressive values. Others have come to see face coverings as an unfortunate social barrier between their children and the world. And many people are somewhere in between.

In Newton, 65 percent of elementary school students, 79 percent of middle schoolers and 88 percent of high schoolers are vaccinated, according to the district. The district is 61 percent white, and 14 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

Some prominent leaders in the community say they are ready to relax restrictions.

In Boston, where vaccination rates are somewhat lower — significantly so for Black and Latino children, who make up most of the district — the public school district says it has no plan to end its mask mandate.

Neither do some of the city's charter schools.

David Steefel-Moore, director of operations for the MATCH charter school network, said he had heard “no negative blowback” on masking from parents, who are overwhelmingly Black and Latino. “We have the other side of that: ‘My child told me there is a kid in their class with the mask down around their neck. What are you doing about that?’”

For students in Boston who may be living with a grandparent or family member with underlying health issues, the end of mandatory masking could put children and teenagers in the uncomfortable position of having to choose between their family's sense of safety and fitting in at school, said Gayl Crump Swaby, a Boston Public Schools parent and professor of counseling who specializes in issues of trauma for families of color.

“They should not have to be making these kinds of decisions; they are young,” she said.

Some parents might even prefer online schooling to classrooms with unmasked peers and teachers, she added.

In Newton, one of the most prominent voices in the masking debate is Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of the Brown University School of Public Health, and a parent of students in the district. He serves on the district's medical advisory group, and has become an outspoken advocate for unmasking children as Omicron recedes.

The group will meet this month to formulate a recommendation on masking for the elected school committee, which will make the final decision.

Dr. Jha does not believe that his own children have been seriously harmed from masking, and does not believe that the pandemic is over.

But he wants to unmask soon, he says, in part to offer some social and academic normalcy, given that he thinks future coronavirus surges in the United States are likely to require masking again — potentially in the South over the summer and in the North this fall and next winter.

He argued that with new therapeutics to treat Covid-19, there is little upside this spring to masking in regions, like the Boston area, with relatively high vaccination rates and plummeting infections.

“If not now, when?” he asked. “Because I don’t foresee a time in the next couple of years that will necessarily be that much better.”

Vulnerable teachers and students, he said, could stay safe by wearing high-quality masks even when those around them are not covered. Throughout the pandemic, he pointed out, virus transmission inside schools has been limited, including in some places where masks have not been required.

Dr. Jha’s advice, however, is not necessarily reassuring to educators who have seen guidelines change frequently over the past two years.

In many left-leaning regions, virus safety plans have been painstakingly negotiated between teachers’ unions and districts, and they may be complex to roll back.

“The knowledge of the virus changes, the variants change, the facts change, which is really frustrating,” said Jessica Tang, president of the Boston Teachers Union.

Teachers’ unions have been among the strongest supporters of masking, pushing in recent weeks for their members and students to have access to medical-grade masks and respirators, such as N95s, KN95s, KF94s and surgical masks. But individual teachers disagree on how important masks are, and how they are affecting students.

In Newton, Suzanne Szwarczewicz, an elementary school English-language learning teacher, said masks had presented challenges for young children who were native speakers of languages like Russian, Mandarin, Cantonese, Hebrew and Spanish.

Last school year, Ms. Szwarczewicz experimented with teaching English in a mask with a clear plastic front so students could see the shapes her lips and tongue made while enunciating. But she gave that up when those masks quickly became damp and uncomfortable. She now uses videos to demonstrate proper pronunciation, and sometimes lowers her own mask briefly while standing several feet away from students.

Ms. Szwarczewicz said she would be comfortable with students taking off their masks, and would feel safe knowing her own mask offers protection. Still, she would gladly march in support of colleagues if her union voted to protest any relaxation of masking rules, she said.

The president of the Newton Teachers Association, Mike Zilles, indicated that there may, indeed, be resistance if the school committee chose to make masking voluntary. The state and district have recently eased in-school virus testing, contact tracing and quarantine procedures, leaving masks as an important remaining defense, he argued.

Feelings of pandemic burnout are common among teachers.

“We were thrown in there, asked to risk our lives, and nobody really acknowledged that,” Mr. Zilles said. “We were the guinea pig.”

	<p>Dr. Jha did acknowledge that academic studies were unlikely to sway those fearful of unmasked students, but said he anticipated consensus growing over time, as students in neighboring districts shed their face coverings without outbreaks.</p> <p>“People have to emotionally and mentally get to a point where they are comfortable with this,” he said. “If the kids are all masked for the next two years, that’s a problem. I will push back pretty hard. But if they’re masked the next month or two, that’s fine.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 WHO: Africa can learn to live w/coronavirus
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/10/world/covid-19-news#africa-can-learn-to-live-with-the-coronavirus-but-still-faces-hurdles-who-officials-say
GIST	<p>Nearly two years after Africa recorded its first coronavirus infection, a top World Health Organization official said that the agency was confident the continent could handle the next phase of the pandemic: learning to live with the coronavirus, despite having the lowest vaccination rates of any continent.</p> <p>During a virtual news conference on Thursday, Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, the W.H.O.’s regional director for Africa, pointed to the continent’s experience with managing large viral outbreaks, while acknowledging that uneven global distribution of Covid vaccines remained a challenge for many countries.</p> <p>Countries on the continent need to scale up their ability to distribute vaccine doses to poor or isolated communities, Dr. Moeti said. Vaccine shipments to the region have significantly increased in recent weeks, but national authorities have struggled with bottlenecks in storage and delivery.</p> <p>Throughout the pandemic Africa has reported fewer cases per capita than other regions, according to figures compiled by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University. Coronavirus cases have been significantly undercounted around the world, experts say, especially in places where people have limited access to health care and testing — and testing rates in Africa have been low, a problem that W.H.O. officials said needed to be addressed. Only about 10 percent of Africa’s population is fully vaccinated.</p> <p>Four major coronavirus waves have swept through Africa since the pandemic began in 2020, driven by successive variants of the virus. Dr. Moeti noted that while the first wave lasted 29 weeks, the most recent Omicron-driven surge lasted just six weeks before subsiding. Along the way, she said, health care services on the continent have become more agile, responding faster to each new surge than the one before.</p> <p>“If the current trends hold, there is light at the end of the tunnel,” Dr. Moeti said. “As long as we remain vigilant and we act intensively, particularly on vaccination, the continent is in track for controlling the pandemic.”</p> <p>Other W.H.O. regional leaders have said the next phase of the pandemic is approaching. Dr. Hans Kluge, the director for the agency’s European region, said last month that with more natural immunity through infection, the surge driven by the highly contagious Omicron variant has brought the continent closer to “stabilization and normalization.” But he said that it was too early for nations to drop their guard, with so many people unvaccinated around the world.</p> <p>Dr. Moeti encouraged wider use of genomic-sequencing technology in Africa to help speed up the detection of new variants. The technology is available only in a few of the region’s middle-income countries like South Africa and Botswana.</p> <p>The region Dr. Moeti oversees includes most of the continent, but omits seven countries in the north and east that the W.H.O. counts instead as part of its Middle East region.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Land, sea buildup: Russia closes in Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/world/europe/russia-ukraine-military-deployment.html
GIST	<p>MOSCOW — Thousands of Russian troops on Thursday began 10 days of exercises in Belarus, and Ukraine warned of upcoming Russian naval drills so extensive they would block shipping lanes, as the Kremlin continued to tighten its military vise on Ukraine.</p> <p>In Moscow, Russia’s top diplomat, Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov, gave a bleak assessment of the diplomatic efforts aimed at deterring a full-scale invasion. He dismissed his talks with his British counterpart as a conversation of a “mute person with a deaf person,” asserting again that the West was not seriously addressing Russia’s most pressing concerns.</p> <p>President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia was slightly more conciliatory, telling reporters on Thursday that negotiations with the West were continuing over Russia’s demands to reshape the security architecture of Eastern Europe. He said Russia was preparing written responses in its back-and-forth with the United States and NATO, and added that he planned to speak by phone in the coming days with President Emmanuel Macron of France.</p> <p>But the intensifying Russian military activity north, east and south of Ukraine gave an ominous undertone to the diplomatic scramble. Satellite images collected on Wednesday and Thursday revealed new deployments of Russian military equipment and troops in Crimea, western Russia and Belarus.</p> <p>President Biden, warning Americans in Ukraine to leave, told NBC News in an interview on Thursday that he would not send troops to rescue remaining U.S. citizens in the event of an invasion, and risk direct conflict with Russian forces. “That’s a world war when Americans and Russia start shooting at one another,” he said.</p> <p>In Belarus, Ukraine’s northern neighbor and Russia’s closest international ally, Russian fighter jets launched air patrols, and Russia’s potent S-400 air defense systems were deployed near the Ukrainian border. Russian marines normally based in eastern Siberia — more than 2,500 miles away — practiced urban warfare during the drills, the Russian Defense Ministry said.</p> <p>And off Ukraine’s southeastern coast, in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, Russia was preparing to hold large-scale naval exercises — prompting a protest from Ukraine that they would block vital trading routes. Ukraine said the planned drills were “an abuse of international law” by Russia “in order to achieve its own geopolitical goals,” and it called on other countries to respond by barring Russian ships from their ports.</p> <p>Ukraine’s seaports of Odessa, Mykolaiv, Kherson, Mariupol and Berdyansk, which could be disrupted by the Russian military exercises, are gateways for the vast grain exports from Ukraine’s black earth farming zone, along with coal, steel and other commodities important for the country’s economy.</p> <p>Moscow described all the drills as legal under international law, and promised that Russian troops would leave Belarus after the exercises there conclude on Feb. 20. But Western officials worry that the exercises are a cover to position more Russian forces around Ukraine, giving Mr. Putin the ability to launch an invasion on short notice.</p> <p>Western officials have said they do not believe Mr. Putin has made a decision to invade. But combined with Russia’s recent buildup on Ukraine’s eastern border and in Crimea, the troops in Belarus and the amphibious landing ships and other warships gathering off Ukraine’s coast created the sense of a noose tightening around Ukraine.</p> <p>“This is a dangerous moment for European security,” Jens Stoltenberg, NATO’s secretary general, said, describing Russia’s military deployment to Belarus as its biggest since the end of the Cold War. “The warning time for a possible attack is going down.”</p> <p>The joint news conference in Moscow by the top British and Russian diplomats offered a stark display of the clashing worldviews that have made the crisis over Ukraine appear nearly impossible to resolve.</p>

Foreign Secretary Liz Truss of Britain, making a hastily scheduled visit, reiterated Western warnings that an invasion of Ukraine would result in “a prolonged and drawn-out conflict,” and that Russia needed to pull back the 130,000 troops that U.S. and Ukrainian officials estimate it had massed near Ukraine’s borders.

Mr. Lavrov countered by repeating the Russian government’s contention that it was not threatening anyone, and therefore had no reason to de-escalate.

“You first have to prove to me that we are the ones who created this tense situation,” Mr. Lavrov said, rejecting the idea of a Russian invasion as bordering on farce. The West “is trying to make a tragedy out of this, while, increasingly, it’s similar to a comedy.”

While Mr. Macron, the French president, sought to strike a constructive tone after meeting on Monday with Mr. Putin for five hours in Moscow, little optimism emerged from Ms. Truss’s visit.

“I am honestly disappointed that we’re having the conversation of a mute person with a deaf person,” Mr. Lavrov said. “It’s as though we are hearing each other, but not listening.”

Russia has made a series of demands of the West, including scaling back the NATO military presence in Eastern Europe to 1990s levels, and guaranteeing that Ukraine could never join NATO. The United States has called those demands “non-starters” and instead offered a series of proposals aimed at arms control.

Despite the apparent impasse, Western diplomatic efforts are continuing.

In Berlin, Chancellor Olaf Scholz of Germany met with the leaders of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which all border on Russia. The three Baltic nations welcomed Germany’s recent commitment to send an additional 350 troops to the German-led NATO mission in Lithuania. But they expressed frustration with Berlin’s decision not to supply defensive weapons to Ukraine and hinted that as a key NATO ally, Berlin should shore up its military spending.

Ben Wallace, the British defense minister, is expected to visit Moscow on Friday to meet his Russian counterpart. And next week, Mr. Scholz is due in Moscow for talks with Mr. Putin.

Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called his Belarusian counterpart, Maj. Gen. Viktor Gulevich, according to Belarus. The two discussed “regional security related issues of concern,” the Pentagon said, aiming to “reduce chances of miscalculation.”

Ms. Truss insisted that the facts of the Russian troop buildup spoke for themselves. Her direct language was evidence of the relatively hard line that Britain has struck in the current crisis — alleging Russian plans for a coup in Ukraine, for example, and providing Ukraine with antitank weaponry.

“There is no doubt that the stationing of over 100,000 troops is directly put in place to threaten Ukraine,” said Ms. Truss, who was making the first visit to Moscow by a British foreign secretary in more than four years. “If Russia is serious about diplomacy, they need to move those troops.”

Britain’s prime minister, Boris Johnson, said during a visit to NATO headquarters in Brussels on Thursday that he did not think Russia had made a decision on whether to launch an invasion. “But that doesn’t mean it is impossible that something absolutely disastrous could happen very soon indeed,” Mr. Johnson said.

Mr. Putin has kept the world guessing at his intentions, signaling that he is open to continued negotiations over his demands for a reshaping of Europe’s security architecture, while hinting at the prospect of an all-out war with the West.

But Mr. Lavrov said that any Russian threats to Ukraine were pure fiction — a denial-of-reality approach that echoed Russia’s refusals to acknowledge its military backing for separatists in eastern Ukraine or its

	<p>interference in the 2016 American elections. Mr. Lavrov even professed that Russia was so concerned about Western embassies drawing down their personnel in Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital, that Russia was planning to do so as well.</p> <p>“We’ve started to think that maybe the Anglo-Saxons are preparing something,” Mr. Lavrov said, standing next to Ms. Truss. “If they are evacuating their employees, we will probably also recommend that nonessential personnel of our diplomatic establishments temporarily go home.”</p> <p>Mr. Lavrov added that he had heard nothing from Ms. Truss that British officials had not already said in public.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/10 Threat: armed nationalists in Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/world/europe/ukraine-nationalism-russia-invasion.html
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine — The Ukrainian political activist and militia member sat before his party’s flag leaving little doubt about his readiness for action. The flag depicted two axes crossed against a field of red.</p> <p>Yes, Yuri Hudymenko said, he is ready to take up arms, but not necessarily against Russia. As the leader of Democratic Ax — one of dozens of right-wing or nationalist groups that represent a potent political force in Ukraine and are fiercely opposed to any compromise with Moscow — his anger will be directed at Ukraine’s government if it grants too many concessions in exchange for peace.</p> <p>“We’ll deal with Russia one way or another later,” Mr. Hudymenko said. With a flair for the dramatic, he added: “If anybody from the Ukrainian government tries to sign such a document, a million people will take to the streets and that government will cease being the government.”</p> <p>Moscow has massed more than 130,000 troops on Ukraine’s borders, threatening an invasion unless its demands to rule out NATO membership for Ukraine, and for a rollback of NATO forces in Eastern Europe, are met.</p> <p>It remains unclear whether Western leaders and President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia can negotiate a settlement of the crisis. But any resolution seems likely to force Kyiv to accept politically perilous concessions that could be destabilizing domestically. Earlier this week, for example, France’s president, Emmanuel Macron, proposed the “Finlandization” of Ukraine that would leave it neutral between Russia and NATO, like Finland during the Cold War.</p> <p>Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelensky, has few cards to play in any talks with Moscow. Perhaps his strongest is the threat of an insurgency by nationalist groups like Democratic Ax and the even more influential Right Sector in the event of a Russian invasion. Recently, the government has even urged the nationalist parties to arm themselves more heavily.</p> <p>But the groups are a two-edged sword, threatening not just the Kremlin but also the Ukrainian government, which could be rocked and possibly overthrown by them if Mr. Zelensky agrees to a peace deal that in their minds gives too much to Moscow.</p> <p>Ukraine’s foreign minister and defense minister have both said in recent days that the greatest risk the country faces is internal destabilization under the threat of a Russian invasion, not an actual attack.</p> <p>And in a country whose citizens have twice taken to the streets in the post-Soviet period and unceremoniously booted out governments seen as doing Moscow’s bidding, this is no idle threat. Analysts say that Mr. Zelensky would be taking extreme political risks even to entertain a peace deal, which is why he is so careful not to talk about possible avenues for negotiations.</p>

“Macron wants to sacrifice Ukraine’s sovereignty to calm Russia down but doesn’t understand that it will not work,” said Oleksandr Ivanov, director of a group called Movement Against Capitulation, which plans a street protest in Kyiv on Saturday.

“Diplomats do not understand Ukraine,” he said. “Civil society here has a bigger influence on politics than actual political parties.” For Mr. Zelensky, he added, “the threat of war is actually only a threat, while signing compromises is guaranteed to bring protests.”

He will get no argument from Mr. Hudymenko, whose office walls are decorated with several axes and a crossbow, a reminder that his party provides paramilitary training for its members. He stressed that any protests against a potential settlement would be peaceful, but he left little doubt they would end with the ouster of Mr. Zelensky.

Even mainstream Ukrainian political parties are opposed to making concessions to Russia, and have said they would call for protests if Mr. Zelensky should bend too far.

“All actions of Macron are done with his head facing April elections in France,” said Volodymyr Arieu, a lawmaker with the European Solidarity party of Mr. Zelensky’s predecessor, Petro O. Poroshenko. “I understand, but we shouldn’t follow French interests, or Macron’s interests,” he said. “We should follow Ukraine’s interests.”

Mr. Zelensky, a political outsider and former comedian, won a landslide victory in 2019 on a promise to pursue peace negotiations with Moscow over a grinding, eight-year war in eastern Ukraine with Russian-backed separatists that has claimed about 14,000 lives.

Yet, it is far from clear what such a peace deal would entail.

Mr. Macron has embraced a strategy of reviving talks over the war in eastern Ukraine as a step toward a broader settlement, which would also include negotiations on Russia’s demands for an overhaul of the European security architecture to diminish the role of NATO.

Under one scenario, a settlement deal in eastern Ukraine could rule out future NATO membership for the country. Mr. Zelensky might also forgo NATO membership in exchange for other security guarantees from Western nations, a suggestion he raised last month.

So far, there is no indication any of these ideas have slowed Russia’s military buildup near Ukraine’s borders. Just on Thursday, Russia began joint military exercises with Belarus to the north of Ukraine while to the south the Russian navy declared large swaths of the Black Sea closed for live-fire artillery drills. Those naval maneuvers close sea lanes to Ukraine’s major port of Odessa in an effective blockade.

In Ukraine, nationalist opposition complicates any diplomatic agreement. The risk from the nationalist groups came into focus last fall when Mr. Zelensky accused Democratic Ax of planning an armed protest on Kyiv’s Independence Square as part of a coup plot. But no serious crackdown on Democratic Ax followed. If it were really a coup, “wouldn’t they arrest somebody?” Mr. Hudymenko said.

That put the party, founded by a group of bloggers who chose the ax symbol as a traditional Ukrainian implement used both in peacetime and as a peasant weapon in war, at the center of worries over whether the policy of encouraging military training of civilians was also raising the risk of internal instability.

Mr. Hudymenko, a 34-year-old former journalist and advertising consultant, once spent two months in jail on accusations of blowing up a statue of Stalin in his hometown of Zaporizhzhia, in southeastern Ukraine.

Sipping from a can of Red Bull in an interview in his office, he said he acts strictly within Ukrainian law, which guarantees citizens' rights to protest peacefully. "We have a protest culture, a riot culture," he said.

But he emphasized that there could be no political reconciliation with Russian-backed separatists before Russian troops pulled out of eastern Ukraine, where Moscow fomented the war starting in 2014. That is, in fact, the central demand of Ukraine's government and the stated position of Mr. Zelensky.

To do otherwise, in an effort to ease tensions and potentially avert a major war in Europe, would only encourage Russia to mass troops again in the future, Mr. Hudymenko said.

"Maybe because we are neighbors with Russia, we understand something difficult to understand for people far away," he said. "We understand this war is just part of a very big war that lasted centuries. Whenever Russia has internal cohesion, and an opportunity, it always attacks Ukraine."

Mr. Hudymenko said he keeps a Kalashnikov rifle at home and trains with it regularly, preparing to fight the Russians. He said he would use his rifle at a protest only if police opened fire on the crowd, as happened during protests in 2014 in Kyiv.

Mr. Zelensky and his government may be under pressure from both Ukrainians and Russia, Mr. Hudymenko said, but in the final analysis, "they fear the Ukrainian people more than they fear the Russian army."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 US: Americans leave now, no retrieval later
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/us/biden-ukraine.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — President Biden on Thursday warned Americans to leave Ukraine, saying that U.S. troops would not be dispatched to retrieve them should Russia invade.</p> <p>"American citizens should leave, should leave now," Mr. Biden said in an interview with NBC's Lester Holt that aired on Thursday evening, adding that there was no scenario that could prompt him to send troops to rescue Americans. "We're dealing with one of the largest armies in the world. This is a very different situation, and things could go crazy quickly."</p> <p>"That's a world war when Americans and Russia start shooting at one another," Mr. Biden added. "We're in a very different world than we've ever been in."</p> <p>Mr. Biden's comments followed a string of increasingly urgent warnings for U.S. citizens to leave Ukraine as thousands of Russian troops have amassed on its borders.</p> <p>The State Department said on Thursday that "military action may commence at any time and without warning," as it reissued an advisory urging Americans not to travel to Ukraine with its starkest language yet. A military incursion would also "severely impact" the U.S. Embassy's ability to help Americans leave Ukraine, the department said. In October, Ned Price, a State Department spokesman, estimated that about 6,600 U.S. citizens were living in Ukraine.</p> <p>Mr. Biden had previously made clear that he had no intention of sending American troops to defend Ukraine, stating pointedly in early December that the military option was "not on the table," and this week, he warned Americans that "it would be wise" to leave the country. But Jen Psaki, the White House press secretary, avoided directly answering a question Wednesday on whether the United States would assist Americans "stranded" after an invasion.</p> <p>"The United States does not typically do mass evacuations," Ms. Psaki said in a briefing. "There are a range of means that individuals and Americans can depart from Ukraine, and we've been encouraging them to do exactly that."</p>

Satellite images from Wednesday and Thursday showed new Russian forces and equipment [still arriving](#) on three sides of Ukraine. Senior Biden administration officials told lawmakers this month that President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia had assembled everything he would need to undertake an invasion that could take an [enormous human toll](#), including the potential deaths of 25,000 to 50,000 civilians.

Among the [most aggressive](#) actions Mr. Putin could take if he invades is to quickly surround and capture Kyiv, the capital. But officials have stressed that U.S. intelligence analysts still do not think Mr. Putin has yet decided whether to invade.

“I’m hoping that if, in fact, he’s foolish enough to go in, he’s smart enough not to, in fact, do anything that would negatively impact on American citizens,” Mr. Biden said on Thursday.

Asked by Mr. Holt if he had told Mr. Putin whether that was a “line that they can’t cross,” the president was adamant.

“I didn’t have to tell him that,” Mr. Biden said. “I’ve spoken about that. He knows that.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 London police commissioner resigns
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/world/europe/london-police-cressida-dick-resigns-racism.html
GIST	<p>The commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Service in London announced on Thursday that she would step down, under pressure from the mayor over reports of bullying, misogyny and racism on the force.</p> <p>In a statement, the commissioner, Cressida Dick, made clear that she had lost the support of London’s mayor, Sadiq Khan, less than two weeks after a report from England’s official police watchdog described London police officers routinely making jokes about rape and exchanging racist messages.</p> <p>Ms. Dick’s leadership had also come under intense scrutiny after the kidnapping, rape and murder of Sarah Everard, a 33-year-old London woman, by a Metropolitan Police Service officer in March 2021. The killing fueled broader concerns about misogyny within policing, and violence against women and girls.</p> <p>“It is with huge sadness that following contact with the mayor of London today, it is clear that the mayor no longer has sufficient confidence in my leadership to continue,” Ms. Dick said in her statement on Thursday. “He has left me no choice but to step aside as commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Service.”</p> <p>At Mr. Khan’s request, Ms. Dick, 61, said she had agreed to stay on for a “short period” while the service transitioned to a new commissioner.</p> <p>Mr. Khan said on Thursday that he had made clear to Ms. Dick last week “the scale of the change I believe is urgently required to rebuild the trust and confidence of Londoners in the Met and to root out the racism, sexism, homophobia, bullying, discrimination and misogyny that still exists.”</p> <p>“I am not satisfied with the commissioner’s response,” he said in a statement.</p> <p>“On being informed of this, Dame Cressida Dick has said she will be standing aside,” Mr. Khan continued. “It’s clear that the only way to start to deliver the scale of the change required is to have new leadership right at the top of the Metropolitan Police.”</p> <p>A onetime beat cop in the city’s West End, Ms. Dick became the first woman to lead Scotland Yard in its 188-year history when she was appointed in 2017.</p> <p>A graduate of Oxford and Cambridge, she led the police force through a tumultuous period that included a terrorist attack on London Bridge and near Borough Market that killed eight people in 2017, a devastating</p>

fire that year in [Grenfell Tower](#), a high-rise residential building, that killed 72 people and, more recently, large-scale [protests](#) over law enforcement practices.

“I’m incredibly proud of my team and all they have achieved,” Ms. Dick said. “Since Day 1, tackling violence in all its forms has been my No. 1 priority.”

But she added: “The murder of Sarah Everard and many other awful cases recently have, I know, damaged confidence in this fantastic police service. There is much to do — and I know that the Met has turned its full attention to rebuilding public trust and confidence.”

After the police watchdog report was issued, the police service said that the actions detailed within it did “not represent the values” of the force. But Mr. Khan [told the BBC](#) this week that he wanted Ms. Dick “to win back the trust and confidence that’s been both knocked and shattered as a consequence of these cases.”

On Thursday, Mr. Khan thanked Ms. Dick for her “40 years of dedicated public service,” and her work in reducing violent crime. He said he would work with Priti Patel, the British home secretary, on the appointment of a new commissioner.

In [a statement](#), Ms. Patel thanked Ms. Dick for her devotion to public service and said that, as the first female police commissioner, Ms. Dick “exemplified the increasingly diverse nature of our police.”

“She would be the first to say she has held the role during challenging times; yet for nearly five years she has undertaken her duties with a steadfast dedication to protecting our capital city and its people — including during the unprecedented period of the pandemic,” Ms. Patel said.

Boris Johnson, the British prime minister, said in [a statement](#) that Ms. Dick had “served her country with great dedication and distinction over many decades.”

“I thank her for her role protecting the public and making our streets safer,” he said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/11 India court: no hijab for Muslim students
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/11/world/asia/hijab-ban-india-karnataka.html
GIST	<p>UDUPI, India — An Indian court has said that students in the southern state of Karnataka should stop wearing religious garments in class until it makes a final ruling on whether a school there can ban Muslim head scarves, an issue that has stoked weeks of protests and violence and led the authorities to close schools across the state.</p> <p>Muslim student organizations reacted with dismay to the statement issued late Thursday by the Karnataka High Court in Bangalore, the state capital. One said that students were being asked to “suspend their faith.”</p> <p>The ban on wearing the hijab, imposed by a school for girls in the city of Udupi, has become a flash point for the battle over minority rights in India. In January, parents of five students petitioned the court to overturn the ban, arguing that it violated the girls’ right to an education and the free practice of their religion.</p> <p>Last week, the government of Karnataka issued an order in support of the school’s hijab ban. The Karnataka government is controlled by the Bharatiya Janata Party, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a Hindu nationalist whose eight years in power have been marked by a rise in hate speech and religiously motivated violence.</p> <p>Karnataka’s chief minister, who closed schools this week because of the unrest, has said that 9th- and 10th-graders would return to class on Monday, with a decision to be made later about 11th- and 12th-graders.</p>

The court's final ruling on the ban could be days or weeks away. "We think it's really unfair to ask Muslim women to suspend their faith for a few days while the court completes its hearing," Fawaz Shaheen, national secretary of the Students Islamic Organization of India, a Delhi-based group with over 9,000 members, said of the court's Thursday statement.

The conflict began in September at a college preparatory institution for girls in Udupi, a city in southwestern Karnataka. When several Muslim students showed up in hijabs, some teachers whose class they tried to attend turned them away and marked them absent for the day, according to the petition. In prior years, wearing head scarves at the school had not been an issue, according to one of the petitioners.

The students' parents encouraged their daughters to stand their ground, according to their lawyer, Mohammed Tahir. They continued to wear the hijab after the school, Government Women's PU, moved in January to ban it on campus, saying it violated the school's dress code. The school issued the prohibition after meeting with a local lawmaker from Mr. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party, or B.J.P.

"Then the issue started blowing up," Mr. Tahir said. "Whenever students would go in hijab, they wouldn't be allowed inside the compound, too, let alone the classroom."

In recent weeks, the students have been met at the campus gates by scores of boys and men wearing saffron — the color most associated with Hinduism, often worn by supporters of Hindu nationalism — and shouting slogans such as "Hail Lord Ram," referring to the Hindu god.

The unrest also spread to at least a dozen other campuses in the state. On Tuesday, officials ordered schools to close for three days as the police struggled to respond to intensified demonstrations.

At one campus, a boy climbed a flagpole, hoisting a saffron flag as others in saffron scarves cheered below, according to video from local TV news reports. At an engineering school, video showed, a girl arriving in a hijab and robe was met by a large group of boys shouting Hindu slogans. She shook her fist at them.

As the formerly fringe view that India should become a more explicitly Hindu state has found a mainstream advocate in Mr. Modi, Amnesty International and other human rights watchdogs have warned that religious animosity could spiral out of control, perhaps even emboldening Hindu extremists to commit genocide against India's Muslims, who make up about 15 percent of the country, and 13 percent in Karnataka.

Secularism is a cornerstone of India's Constitution, but the line between the state and religion has blurred in recent years, with a saffron-robed Hindu monk at the helm of the government in the state of Uttar Pradesh, and the prime minister seen on television performing Hindu rituals and prayers, observers said.

"What does the government think secularism is in general in public space? This is what must also be argued in court," said Karuna Nundy, a constitutional lawyer.

"If the government wants to take a stand against public displays of religion, it has to take that stand in all cases," she added. "Otherwise it is just naked persecution of minor girls and playing out religious politics on girls' bodies and denying them education."

The hijab conflict is an effort to polarize southern India, political analysts said. While coastal Karnataka is considered a stronghold of the B.J.P. and its ideological fountainhead, a volunteer organization known as the R.S.S., opposition parties mostly hold power in the region.

"They are soft targets," Raviraj, a media studies professor in Udupi who goes by one name, said of the students.

“This is the R.S.S. and B.J.P.’s way of stamping their authority in the universities and targeting first-time young voters,” he said.

India’s Constitution protects religious practice unless it interferes with morality, health or public order. The B.J.P.-controlled state government said in its February order that the students’ hijabs did just that.

After the parents appealed the decision to the High Court, a single-judge bench considered which right had primacy: the students’ right to religious expression or the government’s right to check it when it says law and order has been affected.

The issue of wearing the hijab in school has come up before in India. In 2018, a High Court judge in the southernmost state of Kerala decided that a private Christian school had the right to bar its students from wearing head scarves.

On Tuesday, at Mahatma Gandhi Memorial College in Udupi, students in hijabs and colorful backpacks stood outside the wrought-iron campus gates, demanding to be allowed inside.

Among them was Leefa Mahek, an 11th-grade student who said her head scarf had not been mentioned as a problem by administrators when she was admitted to the school a year ago. With only two months left in the school term, she said she was worried that the ban was jeopardizing her future.

“Last minute they are trying to pour water over our hard work,” she said. “They can’t do this.”

Arsheen, a final-year commerce student who uses only one name, said that she had worn the hijab in colors matching the school uniform — baggy brown pants and a long pink and white blouse — each of the three years she had attended the school.

“Hijab is our right, and nobody can make us give it up,” she said.

The female students were quickly encircled by dozens of boys and young men in orange scarves and turbans shouting Hindu slogans.

“We are protesting here for equality,” said Manjunath Shenoy, an 11th-grade boy who studies commerce.

“Girls come to the college wearing hijab, and that does not signal equality,” he added, “so we came wearing saffron shawls. Everyone must look equal. And if they are following their religion, so will we.”

At a tea shop across from the school, two engineering students from a nearby college were glued to their smartphones, watching video footage of the protests. Darshan Mahipal, a 19-year-old who is a member of several right-wing Hindu nationalist groups on social media, cast the dispute as a religious battle.

“I think the Hindus will win this war,” he said, glancing up from his phone. “After all, it is about the oldest religion in the world.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Court rejects 4 th recall on Snohomish sheriff
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/fourth-recall-against-snohomish-county-sheriff-rejected-by-states-highest-court/
GIST	OLYMPIA — The Washington Supreme Court has unanimously upheld a lower court’s ruling that rejected a fourth recall petition against Snohomish County Sheriff Adam Fortney.

	<p>The first two petitions against Fortney included allegations he violated his duties by saying he would not enforce pandemic-related restrictions issued by Gov. Jay Inslee and by rehiring three deputies previously fired for misconduct.</p> <p>While courts found some of those charges against the sheriff factually and legally sufficient, the sponsors of the recall campaigns failed to turn in any signatures.</p> <p>One of those petitioners, Lori Shavlik, submitted but then withdrew a third recall petition.</p> <p>Last April, Shavlik filed another recall effort — this one making some of the same allegations as earlier petitions, and adding several new charges. Those included that he retaliated against her because of her prior recall effort; that he sent personal emails from his government account; and that he improperly served on the board of a child advocacy organization, the Dawson Place Child Advocacy Center, and delegated forensic interviews of children to the center’s employees.</p> <p>In a unanimous opinion Thursday, the court said Shavlik’s allegations were all either insufficient or barred because they had been covered by previous recall petitions. The justices ordered Shavlik to pay legal costs Fortney incurred from her appeal of the lower court’s order.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/10 New jobless claims below pre-Covid levels
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/new-jobless-claims-in-washington-remain-below-pre-covid-levels/
GIST	<p>New jobless claims in Washington rose slightly last week, but remain well below pre-pandemic levels as the state economy continues its recovery from layoffs due to COVID-19 and harsh winter weather.</p> <p>Washingtonians filed 4,863 new, or “initial,” claims for jobless benefits in the week ending Saturday, according to data posted Thursday by the state Employment Security Department. That’s up less than half a percent from the prior week, and is around 40% below the same week in 2020, before the pandemic had begun causing major job losses.</p> <p>Washington’s latest claims data comes as the nation saw a 6.7% drop in new claims, to 223,000, the third straight weekly decline, the Labor Department reported Thursday.</p> <p>In Washington, claims in early January had spiked because of a combination of extreme winter, seasonal layoffs and a surge in COVID-19 cases related to the omicron variant of the coronavirus, state economists said.</p> <p>Last week saw new claims remain virtually flat in nearly all industries across the state.</p> <p>The number of Washingtonians collecting benefits last week rose around 3%, to 49,956, and total benefits paid fell 5% to \$24 million.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/10 Two cruise lines drop mask requirements
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2022/02/09/norwegian-cruises-dropping-mask-mandate/
GIST	<p>Norwegian Cruise Line and Royal Caribbean will soon drop their mask mandates, relaxing their coronavirus protocols while the omicron-variant-fueled surge that tore through the cruise industry for months continues an overall decline.</p> <p>Royal Caribbean will allow its latest mask requirement to expire Feb. 14, it confirmed, returning to a pre-omicron policy in which passengers could go without face coverings in areas designated for fully vaccinated people, including some bars, lounges, restaurants, theaters and casinos. The cruise line’s website still instructs customers to mask up in other indoor areas when they’re not actively eating and drinking, in crowded outdoor spaces and at public ports in places where local law requires them. The policy is subject to change, Royal Caribbean said.</p>

Norwegian said in an update to its [Sail Safe guidance](#) that it will nix masking rules for all departures starting March 1. The company recommends passengers wear masks indoors — except when they are actively eating or drinking — and outside when social distancing is not possible. Norwegian will continue to enforce mask requirements on European sailings depending on local government rules.

For sailings that embark after Feb. 28, “the decision to wear a mask covering when onboard is at the discretion of each guest,” the Norwegian guidance said.

In an [advisory](#) last updated Jan. 5, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention maintained a Level 4 warning, its most severe, [recommending against cruise travel](#) because of the risk of coronavirus exposure. Norwegian Cruise Line said in a statement that it was easing its protocols “given the progress in the current public health environment.”

According to the previous CDC sailing order, if at least 95 percent of a ship’s passengers and crew were vaccinated, the vessel was allowed to ease its mask requirements. Once omicron arrived and showed a propensity for breaking through vaccine protections, Norwegian and Royal Caribbean cruises [told customers](#) to mask up again.

Norwegian’s new guidance also requires guests to provide proof of a negative [coronavirus](#) test administered by a verified third party or to present a medically supervised at-home test taken before boarding.

Norwegian has been administering free rapid antigen tests at the pier, but the company will stop covering the cost next month. For passengers unable to obtain proof of a negative test ahead of time, testing will be available at the terminal, but guests must pay for the service. Prices may vary depending on the port and vendor, the cruise line said.

As part of the updated guidelines, children under 5 who are not vaccinated will also be able to board Norwegian ships. Guests 5 and older need to be fully vaccinated, as are crew. Since emerging from an industry-wide shutdown last summer, Norwegian had maintained one of the strictest vaccination policies among major cruise lines, requiring every person onboard to show proof of vaccination and making no exception for young children.

The CDC allowed its mandatory restrictions for cruise travel to [expire](#) Jan. 15, shifting to recommendations.

The agency released [details](#) about its voluntary program Wednesday. Cruise lines have until Feb. 18 to tell the CDC if they plan to participate, but the agency said in January that Norwegian’s parent company had opted in already.

Most of the former rules remain in place as recommendations. But the updates included a higher threshold for a ship to warrant a CDC investigation. While one covid-positive crew member or 0.1 percent of total passengers testing positive met the threshold before, the number is now 0.3 percent of all people on board.

The CDC also added categories to note the vaccination status of ships and included a new level: “vaccination standard of excellence.” Those would be ships sailing with at least 95 percent of travelers who are vaccinated and boosted, if eligible. Protocols for isolation and quarantine on ships in that category are less stringent than on ships where passengers are not up-to-date.

The Cruise Lines International Association said the updated guidance appeared “unnecessary in light of societal trends away from more restrictive measures” and took aim at the new categories in particular.

“The CDC’s guidance for multitiered cruises is counterproductive to consumers, creating market confusion between the various tiers, and potentially unworkable in practice,” the industry group said.

HEADLINE	02/10 Seattle landlords: end eviction moratorium
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/seattle/seattle-landlords-plea-end-eviction-moratorium/281-0127095a-5c40-46c4-81f2-bc0012249167
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Seattle's eviction moratorium is set to expire on Monday, and property owners are hoping Mayor Bruce Harrell won't extend it for the eighth time.</p> <p>Harrell met with about a dozen property owners virtually on Thursday afternoon. During the meeting, which lasted for about 25 minutes, landlords explained why they didn't want the moratorium extended.</p> <p>Former Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan first announced the eviction moratorium in March of 2020, shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic began. The moratorium restricts landlords from evicting their tenants for non-payment during the pandemic unless there's an "immediate threat to life and safety." The executive order also extends other COVID-19 related measures to help reduce stress on tenants, such as utility payments.</p> <p>Harrell said he had heard from many property owners seeking an end to the moratorium.</p> <p>"I think I understand the plight and the challenges of the landlord community quite well but I'm certainly willing to hear more," he said.</p> <p>Deo Chand, who owns a house with his wife in south Seattle, explained a tenant moved into his rental property and has not paid them any rent since July of 2020.</p> <p>"We are stuck paying the mortgage and property tax with no relief or nothing," Chand said. "They are putting the house in a mess. We might have to demolish the thing before we can occupy it back."</p> <p>Mayor Harrell also heard from Buffy McCormack, who isn't a landlord but has a similar story. Her parents owned a house in Ballard. She says a family member let people into that house. McCormack says her inability to get those people out of the home forced her to sell.</p> <p>"I guess the hardest thing for me to understand is why it has to be a blanket policy to cover my situation which is very, very, very different than a family who has hit hard times due to COVID," McCormack said.</p> <p>The mayor's office told KING 5 News on Thursday that a decision on either extending or ending the eviction moratorium will be announced on Friday.</p> <p>"Bear with me," Harrell pleaded with those on the call. "I'm working on where we're going to end up on this."</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/10 SEA preparing for GOAT trips in 2022
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/trending-in-travel-goat-trips-how-sea-tac-international-airports-preparing
GIST	<p>SEATAC, Wash. - More and more people are taking to the skies in 2022.</p> <p>The numbers at Sea-Tac International Airport are on the rise, reporting more than 36 million passengers last year. That's up more than 80 percent from 2020, the first year of the pandemic, though still below pre-pandemic levels.</p> <p>The airport's serving more than 20 international cities, those destinations, likely to be added to people's bucket lists. This year's travel trends, predict the year of the GOAT - more people taking the 'Greatest Of All Time' trip.</p> <p>A group of four female travel companions, originally chose a cruise through Israel for their big trip, but when the cruise line went bankrupt, they had to find another destination.</p>

Debbie Cederbaum's their expert travel planner.

"The best price I can get for traveling, so looking at airfare, trying to prioritize price, and there are really acceptable hotels that are down in Puerta Vallarta, so we're going there. We usually go to Cabo but we wanted to change," said Cederbaum.

Emily Stehr says choosing the destination to celebrate her 23rd birthday was easy.

"My family has been going to Disneyland every year since I was a kid and this is just a special place for us because we haven't been able to go for two years because of the pandemic and there's nowhere else I'd rather spend it really," she said.

Her best friend Olivia Heeb is going with her.

"I mean I haven't been on a trip with her since high school and it was about time," said Heeb.

With more people planning and anticipating big travels, airport managers say they're working on improving the experience for people passing through, working to make it more predictable, with more water bottle filling stations and healthy meal options plus nursing suites.

They're also giving flyers a way to predict their time in security lines, giving them the chance to make a reservation to save a spot in line for security.

Airport spokesman Perry Cooper also says they're adding more staff. It's easy to spot the helpers at the airport, dressed in green. They help direct travelers and answer questions. Right now, Cooper said they've got 16 of these Pathfinders and they're hiring 5 more.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Glacier Peak 'very high' threat for eruption
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/scientists-seek-new-monitoring-systems-as-glacier-peak-is-at-very-high-threat-of-volcanic-eruption
GIST	<p>SNOHOMISH COUNTY, Wash. - National Parks along the west coast promoted visiting volcanoes and outdoor recreation during "Volcano Week." Some agencies in Washington used the week as an opportunity to raise awareness about the five active volcanoes in the state.</p> <p>The Pacific Northwest is enchanted by nearly a dozen majestic volcanoes that shape the landscape, however, there is concern over a volcano that lacks eruption monitors to predict when it might blow up.</p> <p>Glacier Peak in Snohomish County is currently at a "very high" threat for eruption -- the top classification of threat levels, according to federal scientists. Currently, there is only one seismometer on the volcano to detect movement.</p> <p>"You might ask why? Why is there only one seismometer at this volcano that is active and is very high threat level? Well, it's very remote. It is in the middle of a designated wilderness, and beyond that, the area around it is wilderness," said Weston Thelen of USGS Cascades Volcano Observatory. "So, trying to get the data from the volcano out to a place where we can then download it and get it onto our computers is very difficult."</p> <p>Thelen is a research seismologist for the observatory. He said the agency made a proposal to the federal government, asking to replace the current seismometer and add four more. He said the tools are critical in collecting the most accurate data and motion.</p> <p>"We really need a group of instruments, not only seismometers, but also instruments that help us understand if the volcano is inflating or deflating," said Thelen. "That could be an additional clue that we</p>

can use, on top of earthquakes, it would tell us that something is going on on the volcano and that we need to be responding to that. One station is not generally enough for us to know or be able to forecast or tell people that unrest is occurring."

Information from the additional monitors could be life-saving for the Town of Darrington, only 20 air miles from Glacier Peak and in the Lahar hazard zone.

"Those new monitors would give us the adequate time to prepare our community, to evacuate, and create those mechanisms and infrastructure it needs to get out of harm's way," said Dan Rankin, mayor of Darrington. "They'll be real-time, they'll be in strategic places, so we know what's going on on that mountain all the time, 24/7, 365 days a year."

With five active volcanoes in the state, the Washington Emergency Management Division advised everyone to prepare an emergency kit that includes two weeks' worth of food, water, clothes, hygiene products and comfort items.

"This evacuation order or evacuation recommendation, even, could happen at the middle of the night. You could have to wake up and immediately grab that bag and get out the door. For these Lahar zones, if everybody gets on the road – we've done this with modeling – if you drive, not everyone is going to make it out. So, we recommend walking. You can practice these evacuation routes, practice walking with your family," said Brian Terbush, Emergency Management's earthquake and volcano program coordinator.

Terbush suggested people spend one hour per month preparing an emergency kit and practicing a [volcano](#) evacuation plan. Emergency Management has [online resources](#) for guidance.

"If you're going to be in one of those zones, if you live in one of those zones, or go to school in one of those zones it's really important to understand how to evacuate out of that area and also how you're going to get alerted if that's going to happen," said Terbush.

Rankin said during a state of emergency and time is of the essence, having a plan could make a significant impact.

"It's not only important, it's crucial. And we witnessed this in 2014 in the Oso landslide, how important it was when your community is instantly cut off," said Rankin.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Nevada, Vegas casinos drop mask mandate
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/nevada-vegas-casinos-rescind-mask-mandates-effective-immediately
GIST	<p>LAS VEGAS - Nevada and its casinos have rescinded requirements for people to wear masks in public, joining most other U.S. states lifting restrictions that were imposed to limit the spread of the coronavirus.</p> <p>Democratic Gov. Steve Sisolak announced Thursday that he would no longer require face coverings in public places, "effective immediately."</p> <p>State casino regulators followed with a rule change for casinos.</p> <p>"Individuals are no longer required to wear a mask in public indoor settings in licensed gaming establishments," the Nevada Gaming Control Board said, "unless a local jurisdiction still imposes such a requirement."</p> <p>Masks won't be required in jails and correctional facilities, Sisolak said, but "there are locations where Nevadans and visitors may still be asked to wear a mask" including hospitals, clinics and long-term care facilities, and at airports, on planes and on public buses and school buses.</p> <p>The governor acknowledged a wide divergence of opinion about dropping the mask mandate.</p>

"Some people think we were ready long ago, some people think we're not ready yet," he said. "I feel now is the appropriate time to move forward."

He added that employers and school districts can still set their own policies.

The National Federation of Independent Business state chapter on Wednesday urged Sisolak to drop the mask mandate it said was making it hard for small businesses to retain and hire workers.

Separately, Bill Hornbuckle, president and CEO of MGM Resorts International, the state's largest employer, said during an earnings conference call Wednesday that he anticipated the mask rule in Nevada would be relaxed.

"I expect that given positive COVID trends in Nevada we will start to see meaningful loosening of COVID restrictions in the very very near future consistent with what we have seen in other states," Hornbuckle said.

Nationally, cases and hospitalizations from COVID-19 have dropped markedly after peaking earlier this year amid the spread of the highly transmissible omicron variant, and the vast majority of Americans are protected against the virus by effective vaccines and boosters.

But the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention continues to recommend wearing a mask indoors in places of "substantial or high transmission" of the virus, which as of Wednesday was all of the U.S. but 14 rural counties.

New cases in Nevada have continued a steep decline since a statewide peak in mid-January. But the rate of the virus spread remains high — far above the CDC's thresholds for positivity and new cases per population of 100,000.

"I want to be clear, the emergency is not over. The pandemic is not over," Sisolak said Thursday. "We're still getting far too many cases, far too many hospitalizations and far too many deaths."

But he said a significant drop in hospitalizations in recent weeks has accompanied a dramatic decline in new cases, from a peak of 7,865 on Jan. 10 to about 1,280 cases per day statewide now. He also noted that two-thirds of Nevadans age 5 and older are vaccinated.

"I'm hopeful and confident, based on the data we have, we are in a good positions to drop this and to give people back some freedom. Everyone wants to get back to their normal life ... I mean, its been two years. I think the time has come," he said.

Sisolak, who is up for reelection in the Western swing state in November, said the state is spending \$19 million in federal coronavirus relief funds to address the availability of COVID-19 test kits and therapeutics.

A crowded field of Republicans vying to run against Sisolak have criticized Nevada's virus response and mask rules.

Sisolak acted just days after officials in neighboring California announced an end next week to indoor masking requirements for vaccinated people. Masks will remain the rule for schoolchildren in that state.

New York and Illinois on Wednesday became the latest states to announce an end to indoor mask mandates, but school mandates remain in those states.

The NFIB Nevada chapter cited a U.S. Chamber of Commerce analysis that found the Silver State had the highest "quit" rate in the nation last year at 3.8%.

	<p>Workers cited mask requirements and harassment by customers who refuse to wear masks among reasons for leaving their jobs, the chamber said.</p> <p>"While many question the effectiveness in stopping the spread of COVID, there is agreement that after two years more and more people are refusing to wear masks, which is presenting a challenge to employees who still have to act like the 'mask police,'" its letter to Sisolak said.</p> <p>Since July 2021, Nevada had been under a state emergency order requiring people in counties with high COVID-19 transmission rates to wear masks in indoor public spaces, consistent with CDC guidelines.</p> <p>Sisolak said the CDC guidelines no longer would be binding in Nevada under the new executive order he signed on Thursday.</p> <p>He said schools were the only place where his order did not take effect immediately, and that would happen on Friday.</p> <p>"Masks are not required for students and teachers and employees beginning tomorrow morning," Sisolak said.</p> <p>"But these students are in school right now and a lot of these civic classes watch these press conferences, so I didn't want them ripping off their masks in the middle of the day. I want to give them a chance to go home, talk to their parents ... and in consultation with their families, decide what is best for them."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Rapid inflation stokes unease
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/business/economy/inflation-cpi-january-2022.html
GIST	<p>A key inflation measure released on Thursday showed that prices are climbing at the fastest pace in 40 years and broadening to touch nearly every corner of the American economy, heightening the risk that they will stay elevated for longer and that policymakers may have to react more aggressively.</p> <p>Markets tumbled after the government released Consumer Price Index data for January, which showed prices jumping 7.5 percent over the year and 0.6 percent over the past month, exceeding forecasts. More worrying were the report's details, which showed inflation moving beyond pandemic-affected goods and services, a sign that rapid gains could prove longer lasting and harder to shake off.</p> <p>Investors speculated that the hot inflation would spur a decisive reaction from the Federal Reserve — possibly a big interest rate increase at the central bank's next gathering in March, though few Fed officials have signaled comfort with such a large move. Making money more expensive to borrow and spend could weigh on demand, slowing the economy and tamping down prices.</p> <p>Wall Street is now anticipating that interest rates could rise to more than 1.75 percent by the end of the year, up from near zero now, and the possibility of a more forceful Fed reaction sent a key bond yield above 2 percent for the first time since July 2019 and deflated stock prices.</p> <p>Most economists still believe inflation will cool by year's end, as automobile prices climb at a more moderate pace and as supply chain problems hopefully ease. But high and widespread price increases portend trouble for a White House that is struggling to convince voters that the economy is strong, and for a Fed that looks increasingly at risk of falling behind the curve.</p> <p>"It was more than expected, and it was broad-based," said Priya Misra, head of global rates strategy at TD Securities, adding that she now expects price gains to slow less drastically this year. "We've gotten used to these big headline numbers, but every aspect of 'transitory' you can push back against now."</p> <p>Economists thought price gains would fade quickly in 2021 — making now-infamous predictions that inflation would prove "transitory" — only to have those projections proved wrong time and again as</p>

booming consumer demand for goods collided with roiled global supply chains that could not ramp up production fast enough.

Lately, it is more than just shortages of goods at play. Price gains are increasingly hitting consumers in hard-to-avoid ways as they show up in necessities: January's inflation reading was driven by food, electricity and shelter costs, the Bureau of Labor Statistics said.

High and broadening inflation has become a political liability for President Biden, as rising prices eat away at household paychecks and detract from a strong labor market with solid wage growth. That has left consumers feeling pessimistic and has all but killed Mr. Biden's chance to pass a sweeping climate and social policy bill given [lawmaker concerns](#) about rising prices.

Ryan Sweet, an economist at Moody's Analytics, estimated that inflation was costing the average household \$276 a month, compared with a more normal rate of inflation, which had been hovering just around 2 percent before the pandemic.

"While today is a reminder that Americans' budgets are being stretched in ways that create real stress at the kitchen table, there are also signs that we will make it through this challenge," Mr. Biden [said in a statement](#). He emphasized that [wages grew more quickly](#) than prices last month — though in general they have not kept up with price gains over the past year.

The White House has introduced policies that might help to ease inflation slightly — [discussing plans to help place](#) military veterans into the short-staffed trucking industry, for instance — but the Fed is primarily in charge of slowing down demand to keep prices under control.

Fed officials have already shifted away from trying to foster a quick economic rebound and toward bringing inflation down.

After Thursday's report, investors expected the Fed to withdraw economic support even more quickly. Markets braced for a half-percentage-point increase in the federal funds rate at the central bank's meeting next month — double the usual increment.

The inflation reading sent stocks down and government bond yields up. The S&P 500 dropped 1.8 percent, while the Nasdaq composite fell 2.1 percent. The yield on 10-year U.S. Treasury notes rose 0.1 percentage points, to about 2.03 percent, the highest level since November 2019.

James Bullard, the president of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, fretted about the January inflation report in an interview with Bloomberg News and suggested that policymakers [should be open to both](#) a bigger-than-normal rate increase and to increasing rates in between officially scheduled meetings.

"You have got the highest inflation in 40 years, and I think we are going to have to be far more nimble and far more reactive to data," said Mr. Bullard, who has at times espoused bold stances that are not followed by his policymaking colleagues.

The Fed generally moves borrowing costs in between meetings only at stressed moments and in emergencies, as was the case when it cut rates to zero between planned gatherings in March 2020.

Inflation is abnormally high relative to the central bank's goal: The Fed aims for 2 percent inflation on average over time, defining that target using [a different but related inflation index](#) that is also sharply elevated.

And it increasingly appears to be driven less by the pandemic and more by a strong economy. Price increases in 2021 came heavily from roiled supply chains that sent new and used car prices and furniture costs up sharply. Those continue to be a big factor elevating overall inflation, but other areas are also fueling the rapid rise.

Rent of a primary residence, which counts for a big chunk of overall inflation and tends to respond more to economic conditions than to one-off trends, climbed 0.5 percent in January from the prior month, a slight acceleration. Other shelter costs rose at a steady but notable pace.

“Low vacancies and the end of rent moratoriums are expected to continue to push rents higher in the year ahead,” Diane Swonk, chief economist at Grant Thornton, wrote in a note after the release.

As costs for shelter and other services pick up, policymakers are hoping that supply chains will start to catch up. That could allow prices for goods to moderate or even fall — taking pressure off overall inflation.

It is not clear, however, how quickly that is going to happen. [Protests in Canada](#) have clogged a key trucking route and disrupted parts delivery to car factories, the latest issues in the already unsettled automobile sector. Even if those are not especially disruptive, some industry experts don’t expect a big drop in automobile prices this year, just slower gains.

“The growth rate of vehicle prices — these crazy numbers we saw in 2021 — should start to slow,” said Charlie Chesbrough, senior economist at Cox Automotive. But demand remains robust, and “we’re so far behind on the manufacturing side.”

Still, the Fed’s policy response could help inflation to moderate. Consumers have also been buying goods at an unusually rapid clip, but [recent data](#) suggests they may be [cutting back their spending](#). Economists expect that trend to continue as the pandemic wanes, which could give supply room to catch up.

Some even worry that the Fed could hit the economic brakes just as price gains and economic growth slow on their own. The Fed has in the past spurred recessions by using its blunt tool — an ability to choke off demand — to guide the economy.

“My concern is that they overdo it,” Mr. Sweet, of Moody’s Analytics, said before the report. “This is not going to be easy.”

But emerging trends could keep inflation high.

Jobs data released last week showed that [average hourly earnings](#) climbed rapidly — and much more than economists expected, though still not quite enough to keep up with rapid inflation. Rising pay could lift prices if companies pass those costs along to customers to protect their own profit margins.

For now, corporate profits look strong and productivity is high, which may give companies room to absorb bigger wage bills. And if pay continues to rise less quickly than prices, it may weigh on demand as consumers struggle with costs.

Daniel Ashley, 46, a paralegal in Mount Kisco, N.Y., said his weekly grocery costs had climbed about 20 percent in the last few months, even though he typically buys the same products. He said nearly everything at the store seemed to have become more expensive: A large box of Cheerios now costs him up to \$6, an increase of about a dollar from six months ago.

Mr. Ashley said the rise in food prices would be more manageable if he was not also dealing with higher costs for gas and electricity.

“I have to deal with rising prices for gas. I just found out recently my electric bill is going up,” he said. “Everything is getting more expensive.”

Teneshia Moore, 51, an eighth-grade teacher living in Fraser, Mich., said she had recently stopped buying chicken because it had become too costly. She has been relying on food that she has stored in her freezer and pantry, but she worried that she would have to spend more after depleting her stockpile.

	"It's affecting my quality of life," Ms. Moore said. "I don't like it, but there's nothing I can do about it."
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Canada trucker protest volatile, determined
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/article/canada-trucker-protests.html
GIST	<p>Truck drivers protesting vaccine mandates are parking their rigs in the middle of intersections in Canadian cities, blocking traffic and, in some places, bringing daily life and business to a standstill.</p> <p>Mayor Jim Watson of Ottawa said, "We're in the midst of a serious emergency, the most serious emergency our city has ever faced." The protests quickly inspired similar convoys in Australia and New Zealand.</p> <p>Here is what you need to know about how a handful of people turned Canada, whose constitution calls for "peace, order and good government," into an unlikely springboard for a budding global movement.</p> <p>Why are truckers striking?</p> <p>On Jan. 22, convoys of truck drivers departed from British Columbia en route to Ottawa, Canada's capital, to protest a vaccine mandate — imposed by the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau — for truckers entering the country from America.</p> <p>Mr. Trudeau initially dismissed the protesters as a "small fringe minority" — a majority of Canadians say they support public health measures intended to slow the spread of the coronavirus — but the protesters are having an outsize impact for their small numbers.</p> <p>After first blocking traffic in Ottawa, the truck drivers later staged similar protests in other cities including Toronto, Quebec City and Calgary, as well as on the Ambassador Bridge to Detroit, a vital link for the automobile industry.</p> <p>In Ottawa, the protesters are hunkering down. There are now tent encampments, tables with hot coffee and mittens.</p> <p>Even some allies of Mr. Trudeau say the overall target of the protesters — pandemic restrictions — is worth examining.</p> <p>Joël Lightbound, a Liberal member of Parliament from Quebec, said that people worried about the government's policies had "legitimate concerns" and that Mr. Trudeau should not "demonize" people worried about the restrictions.</p> <p>What's the impact of these protests?</p> <p>The goal is to disrupt daily activities for residents and slow down the economy in order to force federal officials to roll back pandemic restrictions.</p> <p>Mayor Watson has described the protests as unbearable and has declared a state of emergency. During the first 11 days of the protest, truck horns blasted up to 16 hours a day.</p> <p>Crowds of protesters are roaming the streets of Ottawa, many wearing Canadian flags as capes or carrying them on hockey sticks.</p> <p>Some residents say they have been harassed on the street, and recount being frightened or even chased. The police were investigating a possible arson attempt in the lobby of an apartment building downtown. Some automakers ran plants at reduced capacity and canceled shifts because of delays created by blockades.</p> <p>Protest organizers raised about 10 million Canadian dollars, about \$7.8 million, through GoFundMe for the "Freedom Convoy" cause, though only a small fraction of that has been disbursed. After consulting</p>

the police, the company shut down the campaign and said it would refund the rest of the money to donors, citing “violence and other unlawful activity” during the demonstrations.

Can the government clear the protesters out?

That’s tough. There have been thousands of demonstrators, and Mr. Trudeau has ruled out using the military to disband the protests.

All the towing companies contracted by the city of Ottawa have [refused to tow the vehicles](#), Steve Kanellakos, the city’s manager, told reporters.

More than 400 trucks and other vehicles were illegally parked throughout downtown, including right across from the Parliament building. The police seized canisters of fuel that was being delivered to the protest encampments.

Steve Bell, Ottawa’s deputy police chief, described the protesters as [“highly determined and volatile.”](#) Police officials there have asked for 1,800 more officers, which would more than double the current size of the force.

Who is leading these protests?

The protests, which were once narrowly focused, have mushroomed into a sprawling campaign supporting, in some case, far-right, anti-government grievances.

Tamara Lich is a key organizer of the “Freedom Convoy” that arrived in Ottawa. She previously worked as the secretary of the relatively new [Maverick Party](#), a right-of-center group that was started to promote the separation of Canada’s three western [Prairie Provinces](#) from the rest of the country. She is also a former fitness instructor who has sung and played guitar in an Alberta band called Blind Monday.

Maxime Bernier is leader of the far-right People’s Party of Canada, whose members are well represented among the protesters in Ottawa. The party has no seats in the federal Parliament.

James and Sandra Bauder are leaders of a group calling itself Canada Unity, another main organizer of the truck convoy. [According to Sky News](#), Mr. Bauder “is a supporter of the QAnon conspiracy theory and has openly called for Mr. Trudeau to be put on trial for treason over his Covid policies.”

What did protest leaders say they want?

Speaking at a news conference in Ottawa, Ms. Lich said, “Our departure will be based on the prime minister doing what is right, ending all mandates and restrictions on our freedoms.”

Mr. Bernier has denounced vaccine mandates and has previously railed against immigration and multiculturalism.

The Bauders have said, among other things, that they support “the Constitution and democratic process” and “remain committed to following lawful process and upholding freedom of choice.”

What happens now?

Brace for more protests. Prominent far-right figures in several countries, including the United States, Australia and Germany, have praised the protests. And [copycat convoys](#) have already appeared in Australia and New Zealand.

Brian Brase, a trucker, [said](#) he was organizing a similar effort in the United States. According to messages posted on social media, the convoy may start in Sacramento and head to Washington, D.C. Organizers and participants appear to be organizing via private message groups, including on Facebook and Telegram.

[Return to Top](#)

SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/nyregion/vaccine-mandate-nyc-workers.html
GIST	<p>Hundreds of municipal workers marched across the Brooklyn Bridge this week, chanting in unison for New York City to end its vaccine mandate, and carrying signs that said “Fire Fauci” and “Unvaccinated Lives Matter.”</p> <p>Their pleas were rejected by Mayor Eric Adams, who has reaffirmed the city’s looming ultimatum: If city workers do not get vaccinated, they are the ones who will be fired.</p> <p>The Adams administration is poised to dismiss up to 3,000 municipal workers on Friday for refusing to get vaccinated against the coronavirus, in what could be the nation’s most drastic example of a work force reduction tied to a vaccine requirement.</p> <p>The mandate, put in place by Mr. Adams’s predecessor, Bill de Blasio, has been effective: About 95 percent of the city’s 370,000 workers have received at least one dose of the vaccine, an increase from 84 percent when the mandate was first announced in October.</p> <p>Mr. Adams has repeatedly said that he preferred not to fire police officers, firefighters and teachers, but that it was more important to enforce vaccination against the virus.</p> <p>“We have to be very clear — people must be vaccinated if they are New York City employees,” Mr. Adams said at a news conference on Thursday in the Bronx. “Everyone understood that.”</p> <p>“We are not firing them,” he added. “People are quitting. The responsibility is clear.”</p> <p>The loss of roughly 3,000 workers would represent less than 1 percent of the city’s work force, but is still believed to be the largest worker reduction in the nation in response to a vaccine mandate. Another roughly 1,000 new city employees must show proof of two doses by Friday or they could also be fired.</p> <p>Dr. Jay Varma, a former health adviser to Mr. de Blasio, said the mandate was one of the most important public health measures the city took during the pandemic, and that it protected essential workers and the public while setting a precedent for private employers and other communities.</p> <p>“Vaccine mandates are contagious,” he said. “Many other cities and states adopted employee mandates after New York City, because if you can make it happen here, you can make it happen everywhere.”</p> <p>Other cities like Boston and Chicago have moved to require vaccination for city employees and have faced serious pushback from unions and workers. In other places like San Francisco, Washington State and Massachusetts, hundreds of workers have lost their jobs, though most have complied with mandates.</p> <p>New York has also seen resistance to its mandate. Unions filed a lawsuit, arguing that the city had overstepped its authority, but the challenges were not successful. A group of unions filed a new lawsuit on Tuesday, claiming that the city was not following due process by firing workers.</p> <p>Harry Nespoli, the president of the sanitation workers’ union, said he was urging Mr. Adams to slow down and not fire workers yet because there were still “people that do not want to put this vaccination in their body.”</p> <p>The city could replace fired workers, Mr. Nespoli said, but the department would lose valuable experience.</p> <p>“If we get another blizzard, service could be affected,” he said. “People are trained at what they do and it’s important. How fast can you train someone compared to someone who has 15 years on the job?”</p> <p>City officials said the potential dismissals should have no effect on city services: The 3,000 targeted workers have been on unpaid leave for months. The city also suggested that the actual number of people</p>

fired may be lower, as some may decide to get vaccinated just before the Friday deadline or submit proof of vaccination.

About 44 sanitation workers were facing termination on Friday, according to Mr. Nespoli.

“It changes every day,” he said. “Some people are getting vaccinations now — they don’t like it, but they’re going for it. They like eating every week and paying their bills.”

Mr. Adams, a Democrat who took office in January, chose to keep other pandemic policies by Mr. de Blasio, including vaccine requirements for private employers and for indoor dining, gyms and movie theaters. About 38,400 city workers have received at least one dose of the vaccine since the municipal mandate was announced in October.

Mr. Adams and Mr. de Blasio have both argued that vaccine mandates are needed to keep New Yorkers safe, and they pushed for more people to get vaccinated and boosted during the Omicron wave. More than 85 percent of adults in the city are fully vaccinated.

Vaccination rates among city agencies have been uneven. The Police Department and Correction Department have the lowest rates with 88 percent of workers who have received at least one dose. About 95 percent of the workers at the Fire Department and the Sanitation Department have received one dose.

The teachers’ union said that the Education Department had sent about 700 of its members termination notices. The city’s largest police union, the Police Benevolent Association, said that 50 of its members were facing termination.

Besides the 3,000 workers that could be fired, another 9,000 city workers are also unvaccinated, but are seeking exemptions, or working with unions to avoid terminations.

In all, about 13,000 workers have applied for exemptions, which are known as reasonable accommodations, and 54 percent of those requests have been processed so far, according to city officials. About 2,100 were approved and 4,910 were denied.

All city workers are required to receive one dose of the vaccine. New hires must get two doses if they received a vaccine that includes a second dose. Booster shots are not required, but [Mr. Adams has said he was considering the idea](#).

Paul Schweit, a firefighter who has been on unpaid leave for months, said he requested a religious exemption that was denied, and he is appealing the decision. While he is not facing termination on Friday, he said he has struggled to pay his mortgage and was working odd jobs to stay afloat. Still, he does not want to be forced to get the vaccine.

“It’s about risk versus reward — me and my family, we try to live as holistic a lifestyle as possible,” he said. “If I don’t need it, I don’t really want it.”

Mr. Schweit, who leads a [group called Bravest for Choice](#) that opposes the vaccine mandate, argued that most essential workers already have antibodies after recovering from the virus. He said workers were willing to be tested regularly.

When Mr. Adams was elected in November, Mr. Schweit said that he had an “extreme amount of hope” that the new mayor would change course from Mr. de Blasio and negotiate with unions to find a solution. He believes Mr. Adams, a former police captain, might change his mind and avoid firings.

“I still have hope — he has the power to re-evaluate this on a daily basis,” he said.

[Return to Top](#)

SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/10/world/covid-19-news#infections-and-hospitalizations-are-falling-in-the-us-but-unevenly
GIST	<p>The rate of new coronavirus infections nationally is dropping. Democratic leaders in New York, California and elsewhere are rolling back mask mandates. Even Dr. Anthony Fauci was quoted this week as saying the country was “certainly” heading out of “the full-blown pandemic phase of Covid-19.”</p> <p>But as the United States moves unevenly toward a new, less restrictive stage of the pandemic, some areas are still tightly in the grip of the highly transmissible Omicron variant.</p> <p>A handful of states in the South, including Kentucky, Oklahoma, Tennessee and West Virginia, reported their highest number of new cases in mid- to late January, according to a New York Times database. Hospitalizations and deaths, whose curves tend to rise several weeks after cases spike, were also troublingly high.</p> <p>In some of these states, the surge may have simply started later. But some also have lower vaccination rates, resulting in more hospitalizations and deaths. While the national average for full vaccination has reached 64 percent of the population, West Virginia and Kentucky are at only 56 percent; Oklahoma has hit 55 percent; and Tennessee is at 53 percent.</p> <p>Daily hospitalizations in Kentucky, Oklahoma and Tennessee have finally, in recent days, declined modestly, according to the database, but in West Virginia, they have gone up slightly. Average daily deaths in West Virginia and Kentucky are still rising.</p> <p>That trend — sharp case spikes that then plunged, with a more modest rise in hospitalizations and deaths following — played out first in Northeastern states like New York and New Jersey, where Omicron arrived earlier, and then across the country.</p> <p>Over the past week, an average of more than 227,000 coronavirus cases has been reported each day in the United States, a decrease of 63 percent from two weeks ago. The national pandemic peak, hit in mid-January, was more than 806,000 cases, according to the Times database.</p> <p>And the daily average number of patients hospitalized with Covid, which peaked on Jan. 20 at more than 159,000, had fallen to around 108,000 by Wednesday. But not every state is on the same timeline.</p> <p>Average deaths are still high in California and Florida, and Washington has reported more Covid deaths in the past week than in any other seven-day period of the pandemic.</p> <p>On Wednesday, as a rush of states announced they would let broad mask mandates expire, Gov. Jay Inslee of Washington sought something of a middle ground.</p> <p>Noting that hospitalization rates were higher in the state “than in any other time during the pandemic,” Mr. Inslee announced the end of an outdoor mask mandate as of Feb. 18, but only offered the hope that he could set a date next week to end the indoor mandate. “Today, caution is still advised,” he said. “It remains our best defense.”</p> <p>The director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Dr. Rochelle P. Walensky, said pointedly on Wednesday that while cases were dropping, it was too soon for all Americans to take off their masks in indoor public places.</p> <p>“Our hospitalizations are still high, our death rates are still high,” she said during a news briefing by the White House Covid response team. “So, as we work toward that and as we are encouraged by the current trends, we are not there yet.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Fastest climb of inflation since 1982
----------	---

SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/10/business/inflation-stocks-economy-news#inflation-cpi-january-2022
GIST	<p>A key inflation measure showed that prices are climbing at the fastest pace in 40 years and more quickly than economists had expected, the latest unpleasant surprise for the White House and Federal Reserve after a bruising year for American consumers.</p> <p>Consumer Price Index data for January, released Thursday, showed that prices have climbed 7.5 percent over the past year, more than the 7.2 percent projected in a Bloomberg survey. On a monthly basis, they picked up 0.6 percent.</p> <p>That is rapid by historical standards, and although it is slower than the fastest monthly increases in 2021, it too was above economists' expectations. The underlying details of the report showed that price pressures are broadening and moving into longer-lasting categories, a development that is likely to prove worrying for economic policymakers and painful for consumers.</p> <p>Forecasters expect that inflation will come down meaningfully in 2022: Many expect it to finish the year closer to 3 percent. But economists regularly predicted that price gains would fade quickly in 2021, only to have those projections foiled as booming consumer demand for goods collided with roiled global supply chains that could not ramp up production fast enough.</p> <p>And today's price increases are hitting consumers in hard-to-avoid ways, as they show up in necessities: January's inflation was driven by food, electricity and shelter costs, the Bureau of Labor Statistics said.</p> <p>"It was more than expected, and it was broad-based," Priya Misra, head of global rates strategy at TD Securities, said of the data. As a result, she thinks inflation will fade by less this year than previously projected.</p> <p>"We've gotten used to these big headline numbers, but every aspect of 'transitory' you can push back against now," she said.</p> <p>Policymakers have expressed more humility around their outlook for inflation in recent months, especially at a time when ports remain clogged, rents and restaurant prices are on the upswing and wages are rising, all factors that could keep inflation hot.</p> <p>High inflation has been a political liability for the White House, because rising prices have eaten away at household paychecks and detracted from a strong labor market with solid wage growth, leaving consumers feeling pessimistic.</p> <p>"While today is a reminder that Americans' budgets are being stretched in ways that create real stress at the kitchen table, there are also signs that we will make it through this challenge," President Biden said in a statement following the release.</p> <p>Rapid price gains have also prompted the Fed to pivot away from its patient policy setting meant to foster a quick economic rebound from the pandemic, including keeping interest rates at rock bottom. Investors now expect that central bankers might lift interest rates six times this year as they try to slow down the economy and tamp down price gains.</p> <p>"Making appropriate monetary policy in this environment requires humility, recognizing that the economy evolves in unexpected ways," Jerome H. Powell, the Fed chair, said at his news conference last month. The Fed aims for 2 percent inflation on average over time, though it defines that target using a different inflation index that is also elevated but not quite as sharply.</p> <p>The new data prompted market investors and economists to up their expectations for the Fed to raise interest rates by half a percentage point in March, rather than a standard quarter-point move.</p> <p>Inflation increasingly appears to be driven less by the pandemic and more by a strong economy. Price increases in 2021 were driven heavily by roiled supply chains that sent new and used car prices and</p>

furniture costs up drastically. Those continue to be a big factor elevating overall inflation, but other areas are also fueling the rapid rise.

Rent of primary residence, which counts for a big chunk of overall inflation and tends to respond more to economic conditions more than to unusual one-off trends, climbed by 0.5 percent in January from the prior month, a slight acceleration. Other shelter costs continued to climb at a steady but notable pace.

“The shelter makes me nervous,” Ms. Misra said, noting that the measure is important and slow-moving.

As shelter and other services costs pick up, policymakers are hoping that supply chains will start to catch up. That could allow goods prices to moderate or even fall — taking pressure off overall inflation. It is not clear, however, how quickly that is going to happen. Protests in Canada have clogged a key trucking route and disrupted parts delivery to car manufacturing plants, the latest issues in the already-roiled automobile sector. Even if those are not especially disruptive, some industry experts are not predicting a big drop in automobile prices this year.

“The growth rate of vehicle prices — these crazy numbers we saw in 2021 — should start to slow,” said Charlie Chesbrough, senior economist at Cox Automotive. But demand remains robust, and “we’re so far behind on the manufacturing side.”

The White House has rolled out policies that might help with high inflation around the margins — releasing strategic petroleum reserves and [discussing ways to place](#) military veterans into the short-staffed trucking industry — but the Fed is primarily in charge of slowing down demand to keep prices under control. Congress has assigned the central bank two main jobs, fostering full employment and price stability.

Fed officials have signaled that they will begin raising interest rates in March. Higher rates can slow down consumer and business spending by making it more expensive to finance a car, house or machine purchase. Policymakers have also suggested that they will soon begin to shrink their balance sheet of bond holdings, which should push longer-term interest borrowing costs and further cool off the economy.

The Fed’s policy response, together with a slow return to more normal business conditions, is expected to slow price gains in the months ahead.

Consumers have also been buying goods at an unusually rapid clip, but [recent data](#) have suggested that they may be in the process of [shifting back toward spending](#) more heavily on services.

Image

Still, rising pay may increase the risk that inflation remains too high for comfort this year. Jobs data released last week showed that [average hourly earnings](#) climbed rapidly — and much more than economists expected, though still not quite enough to keep up with rapid inflation.

Companies may be able to offset rising labor bills with productivity improvements, but if not, they might pass those costs along to customers to protect their own profit margins. That said, corporate profits look very strong and productivity is high, which may give companies room to absorb bigger wage bills. And in recent decades, the relationship between wage growth and inflation has been weak.

Some economists even worry that the Fed might act too aggressively, slowing down the economy just as price gains and economic growth moderate on their own later this year. The Fed has a historical track record of touching off recessions as it uses its blunt tool — an ability to choke off demand — to guide the economy.

“My concern is that they overdo it — being too sensitive to wage growth,” Ryan Sweet, who leads real-time economics at Moody’s Analytics, said before the report. “This is not going to be easy.”

Much like policymakers, companies have expressed uncertainty about when today's rapid price gains will fade.

"I wish I could forecast when this inflation is going to slow down," Brian Niccol, Chipotle Mexican Grill's chief executive, told Bloomberg News [in an interview this week](#). "But unfortunately, we're not getting a sign that it's going to slow down."

The economy has been challenging to predict in the aftermath of state and local lockdowns meant to control the pandemic, and as the virus continues to disrupt ordinary economic patterns. On one hand, job openings are plentiful and workers seem to have newfound power in negotiating better pay and conditions. On the other, the rapidity of price increases has come as a constant surprise.

Krystle Brown, 33, and her husband embody many of the hopes and challenges of a complicated economic moment marked by a strong job market and rocketing inflation. They recently bought a condominium in Salem, Mass., driven in part by the belief that if they did not buy now prices would only climb higher.

They will be able to afford their mortgage payment more easily because Ms. Brown, a visual artist, recently got a new and better-paying job. She had been working two — as a cake decorator and a marketing director at a gallery — making about \$42,000 a year combined. Now, she's a marketing assistant at an art museum, making about \$50,000 per year.

But even with the higher salary, the couple does not earn a lot for their area, and inflation is making things harder. Groceries cost more, and the rapid run-up in car prices has put Ms. Brown's hopes of buying a hybrid or electric vehicle on ice.

"There are so many different elements to it," she said. "And they interact."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 As inflation broadens, more risk will linger
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/10/business/inflation-stocks-economy-news#as-inflation-broadens-there-is-more-risk-that-it-will-linger
GIST	<p>Price increases are broadening to touch nearly every corner of the American economy, heightening the risk that rapid inflation will fade even more slowly than economists and policymakers had expected.</p> <p>Consumer Price Index data released Thursday underlined a constant theme of the past year: Inflation is proving devilishly hard to predict and is turning more painful for consumers.</p> <p>Prices increased by 7.5 percent in the year through January, the government report showed, and climbed 0.6 percent over the past month, more than expected. Those surprisingly big numbers came with worrying details. Even as price gains slowed for some products experiencing pandemic-tied supply chain issues — most notably, new and used cars — the cost of rent, food, electricity and an array of services headed higher.</p> <p>That development caused economists across Wall Street to revisit their forecasts for inflation this year and mark up their expectations for how quickly the Federal Reserve will move to slow the economy and tamp down prices. Most still expect price gains to cool down by the end of 2022 as automobile prices climb at a more moderate pace and as consumers shift from spending on goods to spending on services. But the fact that prices are moving up across a spate of products does not bode well: Inflation may remain higher than economic policymakers would hope for longer than expected.</p> <p>"Inflation is here, and it continues to make its presence known everywhere," economists at Bank of America wrote in a note titled "New Year, New Inflation Surprise."</p> <p>While economists knew that prices for goods would likely be high in the January report, the big price pop in services and products that have been less affected by the pandemic posed a source of worry. Housing</p>

costs, which economists devote a lot of attention to because they make up about a third of the Consumer Price Index and move slowly, climbed notably.

“Low vacancies and the end of rent moratoriums are expected to continue to push rents higher in the year ahead,” Diane Swonk, chief economist at Grant Thornton, wrote in a note following the release.

Plus, rising wages may be helping to put upward pressure on prices as businesses protect their profit margins.

“Everything that includes the cost of labor from laundry services to household operations — cleaning, snow removal, lawn care and repairs — is accelerating,” Ms. Swonk noted.

Wages have been climbing rapidly, with the latest data on average hourly earnings showing that they jumped [5.7 percent](#) from the prior year. That is not enough to keep up with today’s rapid inflation, suggesting that consumer demand should cool over time unless wages begin to catch up as households find themselves less able to afford goods and services.

It is unclear how quickly consumer [demand might moderate](#). It has been strong for months, and while it slackened somewhat during the Omicron surge, most economists do not expect a sudden stop to shopping this year. Unemployment is low, job market opportunities are plentiful, and households are sitting on big savings piles, which should sustain their ability to spend.

Assuming demand holds up, the path toward much-lower inflation is more tenuous. Economists have been hoping to see prices of goods moderate as supply catches up — and that began to happen in this report, with [new car costs](#) actually falling — but goods may simply pass the baton to more expensive services.

Investors are now looking toward the Fed to cool things off. Following Thursday’s data release, markets began to expect a supsize increase in the federal funds rate of half a percentage point at the central bank’s March meeting, which would be twice the usual size.

Higher borrowing costs weigh on demand as consumers and businesses find it more expensive to finance car, house and machine purchases.

“This print lifts our inflation forecasts,” Tiffany Wilding, an economist at Pacific Investment Management Co., wrote in a note following the release. She had been forecasting core inflation — which strips out volatile food and fuel and came in at 6 percent this month — to end the year at 3.3 percent. She now anticipates it to fall only to 3.6 percent.

“This print will surely concern the Fed,” she wrote.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 France to buildup nuclear power program
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/10/business/inflation-stocks-economy-news#france-macron-nuclear-power
GIST	<p>President Emmanuel Macron announced a major buildup of France’s huge nuclear power program on Thursday, pledging to construct up to 14 new-generation reactors and a fleet of smaller nuclear plants as the country seeks to slash planet-warming emissions and cut its reliance on foreign energy.</p> <p>The announcement represented an about-face for Mr. Macron, who had previously pledged to reduce France’s reliance on nuclear power but has pivoted to burnishing an image as a pronuclear president battling climate change as he faces a tough re-election bid in April.</p> <p>“What our country needs is the rebirth of France’s nuclear industry,” Mr. Macron said, speaking against the backdrop of a nuclear turbine factory in the industrial city of Belfort in eastern France as throngs of workers and political officials gathered around. “The time has come for a nuclear renaissance,” he added.</p>

The debate over nuclear power in Europe has taken on new dimensions as leaders pledge to avert a climate catastrophe and as they grapple with a searing energy crisis that has sent prices for natural gas and electricity surging to record highs — in part because nuclear energy production has fallen.

Mr. Macron has been leading a coalition of like-minded countries in backing nuclear energy as a solution to speed up the push to net-zero emissions and energy independence. That has opened a rift with a group of nations led by Germany, which is wary of nuclear proliferation and will close its last atomic power plants this year, following a 2011 policy set by former Chancellor Angela Merkel in the wake of the nuclear disaster in Fukushima, Japan.

The French plan is aimed at cementing the country's position as Europe's biggest backer of atomic-power and positioning Électricité de France, or EDF, the troubled state-backed operator, to compete more aggressively against Chinese and American companies in the growing global market for nuclear energy.

With an estimated starting price of 50 billion euros (\$57 billion), Mr. Macron's blueprint consists of constructing six next-generation mammoth pressurized water reactors at existing nuclear sites around France starting in 2028, with an option to consider building up to another eight more by 2050.

Mr. Macron said France would also build a prototype small modular reactor — a new type of scaled-down modular nuclear power plant — by 2030, putting the country in competition with a growing cadre of others pushing out the technology.

France currently relies on an aging fleet of 56 nuclear reactors — the most after the United States, with 93 — to generate 70 percent of its electricity and to export energy to other countries. But France has fallen from dominance as EDF, which has grappled with a series of longstanding setbacks, now faces a full-blown crisis just as Europe is in an energy crunch.

The company warned this week that its nuclear energy output would slump to the lowest levels since the 1990s because of problems at some sites, sending European energy prices to fresh highs. The company has temporarily closed 10 reactors, down from 17 in December, for maintenance — including to fix cracks found in pipes at some plants.

The energy shortfall has left France in the awkward position this winter of having to rely more heavily on its coal-fired power stations, tap coal-generated electricity from Germany and rely on natural gas imports as prices spike amid the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

While Mr. Macron has sought to position himself as a European leader in transitioning to a carbon-free future, France's wind and solar power capacity are not yet sufficient to make up for the shortfall in its nuclear energy output cuts.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Europe inflation expected peak early 2022
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/10/business/inflation-stocks-economy-news#europe-inflation
GIST	<p>Inflation in countries using the euro, which has soared to record-setting heights in recent months, is expected to peak in the first quarter of this year, the European Commission said on Thursday, as consumers feel the bite of higher energy prices and rising costs of key goods.</p> <p>Euro area inflation for the January-March period will reach 4.8 percent, up from 4.6 percent in the fourth quarter of last year, which was a record since the bloc started measuring inflation collectively in 1997, the commission said in its quarterly economic forecast. Inflation is expected to move down over the course of the year, but it won't reach the 2 percent benchmark target set by the European Central Bank until 2023, the forecast said.</p>

	<p>Economies will continue to grow as the impacts of the pandemic ease, by an expected 4 percent in the euro area this year, according to the forecasts, and by the end of this year will have recovered all their pandemic-era economic losses.</p> <p>But inflation will outpace that average rate of economic expansion, eroding gains and the benefits that such growth would otherwise bring to Europeans.</p> <p>In comments to the news media, Paolo Gentiloni, the European commissioner for the economy, said that the mix of high energy prices and persistent staff shortages caused by the coronavirus were hitting Europe's economic recovery.</p> <p>"Supply constraints have grown and energy prices have continued to be very high," Mr. Gentiloni said. "This has contributed to dent further manufacturing production and again pushed inflation above expectations, with a negative impact on consumers' purchasing power."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Gun rights activists gather in Olympia
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/state/washington/article258274788.html
GIST	<p>A group of gun rights demonstrators and activists gathered at the Capitol in Olympia Thursday to fiercely oppose proposed laws making their way through the legislature this year.</p> <p>On Wednesday night, the Senate passed a bill that would make the selling, distributing, purchasing or manufacturing of magazines with more than 10 rounds of ammunition a gross misdemeanor.</p> <p>The penalty for a gross misdemeanor in Washington state is up to 364 days of jail time, and/or fines up to \$5,000.</p> <p>The bill defines a large capacity magazine as "an ammunition feeding device with the capacity to accept more than 10 rounds of ammunition, or any conversion kit, part, or combination of parts from which such a device can be assembled if in the possession of the same person."</p> <p>The proposed legislation does have some exemptions. Licensed firearms dealers could still sell, manufacture, import, or distribute "large capacity magazines" to any branch of the military and to law enforcement agencies.</p> <p>Senators debated for nearly two hours before passing the legislation 28-20.</p> <p>Dozens of people attended the rally sponsored by the Gun Rights Coalition on Thursday. Several groups turned out to show their support for the coalition and air their grievances against the proposed law.</p> <p>Sharyn Hinchcliffe, a civil rights advocate, was at the rally to represent the nonpartisan Seattle and Tacoma "Pink Pistols" Chapter.</p> <p>The organization started as a group to train those in the LGBTQ community to learn how to shoot guns, as well as raise awareness that people in those communities are able and trained to shoot. The all-inclusive organization now provides safety information and firearms training for anyone who wants it.</p> <p>Hinchcliffe said she is opposed to the legislation that passed Wednesday, and other firearms legislation because the enforcement of such bills are "unequally enforced in marginalized and minority communities."</p> <p>"They are dangerous to BIPOC communities," Hinchcliffe said. And, she added, they are "lethal" to minority communities.</p>

She said that if the proposed gun legislation passes, she believes people will focus on voting elected officials out of office.

“We are working on getting candidates who are not going to violate human and civil rights,” Hinchcliffe said. “And then we’re going to work on getting these laws repealed.”

She dismissed the idea of violence in the pursuit of those goals, and said she would prefer not to see that happen.

Ben “Chief” Charles opened the rally. Charles, who is Native American and Jewish, said he has grown up with the Second Amendment as a “standard” for his family. Historically, he said, guns have been taken away from his Native community, therefore he believes in standing up for the Second Amendment.

“This isn’t just a Republican or Democrat issue, it impacts everybody,” Charles said. “We’re not just gunslingers in the Old West, we take the precautions, we have the safety, we train our family members ... and we want them to be safe.”

Charles said he was “disappointed” in the legislation that passed Wednesday evening and said he feels a “righteous anger.”

“These are servants to the people,” he said of the Senate. “They’re not representing the people in a righteous way.”

Moving forward, if the legislation passes Charles said he doesn’t think elected officials “will ever stop.” He said small moves have been made already and Second Amendment rights continue to be infringed upon. He pointed to the fact that the Capitol used to allow open carry of weapons, but no longer does.

Multiple legislators including Sen. Phil Fortunato, R-Auburn, and Rep. Vicki Kraft, R-Vancouver, spoke to the crowd. Fortunato was heavily involved with the debate on the Senate floor Wednesday, introducing more than a dozen amendments to Senate Bill 5078. None of his amendments were adopted.

Sen. Marko Liias, D-Everett, is the bill’s prime sponsor. During public testimony he talked about the importance of this legislation. He testified that he believes in Second Amendment rights and “fundamental constitutional freedoms,” but that those have to be balanced with the “underlying right to life.”

“High-capacity magazines make it easy for shooters to inflict maximum damage by allowing more shots to be fired without needing to pause to reload,” he said. “Because of that, these accessories are favored by mass shooters in our country.”

He said six of the most recent deadly mass shootings have involved high-capacity magazines. He said the bill sets up a “reasonable framework” for protecting public safety, while respecting constitutional rights.

Liias thinks the bill is a balanced approach for the state. If passed, the bill would go into effect 90 days after the adjournment of the legislative session on March 10.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 States move to end mask mandates
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/dozen-states-move-end-masking-mandates-covid-19/story?id=82806903
GIST	<p>A growing number of states are moving to drop mask mandates and COVID-19 restrictions, as Americans hope to move into a new phase of the pandemic.</p> <p>The decision comes despite continued push back from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which still recommend that masks be worn in areas of substantial or high transmission, and in educational settings, regardless of vaccination status.</p>

"We're not quite there yet," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky [told radio station WYPR](#) this week. The CDC "still recommends that all schools encourage students to wear well-fitting masks consistently and while indoors. And that's consistent with our guidance that still also recommends that people mask in public indoor settings in areas of high or substantial transmission."

Nationwide, nearly 99% of U.S. counties are still reporting high community transmission.

"We owe it to our children to make sure that they can safely stay in school. Right now, that includes masking. We've seen outbreaks that have occurred in communities where students were not masked in schools and had to close. ... And much of our guidance is based on the amount of community transmission," Walensky added.

Since Monday, 11 states have announced changes to their statewide masking policies, with some governors moving to end universal indoor and outdoor mask mandates, while others have lifted statewide face-covering requirements for schools:

California

Universal indoor mask mandate: Expires on Feb. 15

School indoor mask mandate: Remains in place

California's indoor mask mandate is set to expire Feb. 15, Gov. Gavin Newsom announced on Twitter Monday, citing declining infection and hospitalization rates across the state for his decision.

However, unvaccinated people will still be required to wear masks indoors, the governor wrote.

Following the announcement from the state, Los Angeles County health officials said they would keep the county's mask mandate in place for the time being.

LA County Department of Health Director Dr. Barbara Ferrer said on Tuesday that the county's masking requirement will be lifted for outdoor "mega" events when daily hospitalizations drop below 2,500 for seven consecutive days.

In order for the indoor mask mandate to be lifted, Los Angeles County must reach a "moderate" rate of transmission for two consecutive weeks, or for the COVID-19 vaccine to be made available to children ages 6 months to 4 years for at least eight weeks. In addition, the health department said there must be no emerging reports of significantly circulating new variants that threaten vaccine efficacy.

Masks will also be required at Sunday's Super Bowl LVI, hosted in Los Angeles.

Connecticut

School indoor mask mandate: Expires on Feb. 28

On Monday, Gov. Ned Lamont announced that beginning Feb. 28, the state of Connecticut would no longer require masking in schools and child care facilities.

"I think today, with boosters, given vaccines, given the N95 masks, you're in a better position to keep yourself safe. Your child is in a better position to keep him or herself safe," said Lamont, who noted that the decision to end the mandate followed extensive discussions with neighboring governors.

Mask mandates will still exist in homeless shelters, corrections facilities and in certain health care facilities, state officials said.

"I think this is the right decision at the right time," Lamont added. "We now know how to live with this, I think it's going to be milder and less impactful."

Delaware

Universal indoor mask mandate: Expires on Feb. 11

School indoor mask mandate: Expires on March 31

Earlier this week, Delaware announced it intends to lift the state's universal mask mandate on Feb. 11. "We're in a much better place than we were several weeks ago in the middle of the Omicron surge of COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations," Gov. John Carney said in a statement on Monday. "I want to be clear about this point -- COVID is still circulating in our communities. And the virus still poses a risk of serious illness, particularly among those who are not up to date on their vaccinations. But we have the tools to keep ourselves and each other safe."

The governor has also temporarily extended the mask requirement for K-12 schools and child care facilities in an effort to give parents more time to get their children vaccinated. However, that requirement is expected to expire March 31.

Illinois

Universal indoor mask mandate: Expires by Feb. 28

School indoor mask mandate: School mandate embroiled in court battle

Illinois is expected to lift its indoor mask mandate by the end of the month, Gov. J.B. Pritzker announced this week.

"We are on track to come out on the other side of this latest COVID storm in better shape than even the doctors expected," Pritzker said. "If these trends continue, and we expect them to, then on Monday, Feb. 28, we will lift the indoor mask requirement for the state of Illinois."

Pritzker stressed it will be important for local jurisdictions to implement mask requirements, if they feel that is right for their COVID-19 community.

Health officials said that masks are still "highly recommended," and face coverings will still be required on public transportation, and in congregant and long-term care facilities.

Chicago announced on Wednesday that should the city's COVID-19 metrics continue to decline, the city will plan to lift COVID-19 restrictions at the end of the month.

At this time, the state's mask requirement for schools remains embroiled in a court battle, after a temporary restraining order was placed on the mandate last week. However, the governor has vowed to keep fighting for the mandate.

Massachusetts

School indoor mask mandate: Expires on Feb. 28

Effective Feb. 28, Massachusetts will end its statewide school mask mandate, Gov. Charlie Baker announced on Wednesday.

"Given the extremely low risk for young people, the widespread availability and the proven effectiveness of vaccines and the distribution of accurate test protocols and tests, it is time to give our kids a sense of normalcy and lift the mask mandate on a statewide basis for schools," Baker said. "Everyone now has the tools and the knowledge to stay safe. ... It's time to give our kids a sense of normalcy."

The governor cited the state's high vaccination rate as part of the reasoning behind his decision. He added that Massachusetts ranks second in the nation for the highest share of vaccinated children.

Earlier this week, Boston Mayor Michelle Wu said that at this time, the city's mask mandate, which also includes schools, will remain in place.

"The mask mandate, we are not yet there in terms of pulling," Wu said. "We had lots of conversations about other policies in place."

Nevada

Universal indoor mask mandate: Expired on Feb 10

School indoor mask mandate: Expired on Feb 10

Nevada Gov. Steve Sisolak announced on Thursday that he would lift both the state's universal and school mask mandates, effective immediately.

"Some people think we were ready long ago, some people think we're not ready yet," Sisolak said. "I feel now is the appropriate time to move forward."

Masks will still be required in certain indoor settings, including hospitals, clinics and long-term care facilities, as well as in on public and school buses.

Following the governor's announcement, the Clark County School District, which includes Las Vegas, announced that by the end of the day on Thursday, masks would no longer be required on district campuses.

New Jersey

School indoor mask mandate: Expires on March 7

On Monday, New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy formally announced that the state's mask mandate for schools and child care facilities would be lifted March 7.

"We can responsibly take this step given the continuing drop in new cases and hospitalizations from omicron," said Murphy. "Our reality is dramatically different than a lot of other states right now."

New Jersey's mask guidance for schools and child care facilities will be updated in the coming week "to help school districts make the best decisions as to whether and when masks should be worn," according to Murphy.

New York

Universal indoor mask mandate: Expired on Feb. 10

School indoor mask mandate: Remains in place

On Thursday, New York lifted its universal indoor mask mandate. The mandate will remain in effect at homeless and domestic violence shelters, state-regulated health care centers, state-run nursing homes, correctional facilities and in schools and day cares. In addition, mask use will remain in effect on public transportation, including buses, trains, subways and planes.

"This is what we've been waiting for, tremendous progress after two long years," Gov. Kathy Hochul said during a press conference on Tuesday. "We had a mask or vax requirement for businesses ... and at this time we say it is the right decision to lift this mandate."

At this time, the state's indoor masking requirement for schools will remain in place. After the February break, officials will make an assessment on whether it is safe for the mandate in schools to be rescinded, Hochul said.

Oregon

Universal indoor mask mandate: Expires by March 31

School indoor mask mandate: Expires on March 31

The Oregon Health Authority announced this week it would remove the state's general mask requirements for indoor public places by March 31, at the latest.

"We should see COVID-19 hospitalizations drop by the end of March because so many Oregonians are wearing masks and taking other steps to protect themselves and each other, such as getting a booster shot or vaccinating their children. At that point, it will be safer to lift mask requirements," Dr. Dean Sidelinger, health officer and state epidemiologist, said in a statement on Monday.

Mask requirements for schools will also be lifted on March 31.

Rhode Island

Universal indoor mask mandate: Expires on Feb. 11

School indoor mask mandate: Expires on March 4

Rhode Island Gov. Dan McKee announced this week that its mask or proof of vaccination protocol for certain indoor public settings would be lifted Feb. 11.

"We know that as a state and a country, we have to learn how to manage COVID, as we move from a pandemic to an endemic stage of the virus," McKee said during a press conference on Wednesday.

The state's school mask mandate will be extended until March 4, when school masking policies will be decided by individual school districts.

"We can safely make this shift, which will also put us in line with other New England states," McKee added. "Over the next several weeks, before this change takes effect, we expect that numbers will continue to decline, putting us in a strong position to transition to local decision-making on school masks."

McKee said that officials want to give school districts additional time for parents to get their children vaccinated.

Washington

Universal outdoor mask mandate: Expires on Feb. 18

Universal indoor mask mandate: Remains in effect

School indoor mask mandate: Remains in effect

Washington Gov. Jay Inslee announced on Wednesday that the state would lift its outdoor mask mandate, following declining infection rates.

However, at this time, the state's indoor masking mandate will remain in effect.

"Today is not the day to lift all of the masking requirements," Inslee said during a press conference. "It will be, and when we can do this, it is no longer a matter of 'if,' it is a question of 'when.'"

The governor said he expects to have further guidance on indoor mask mandates next week.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Sudan military rulers step up crackdown
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/sudans-military-rulers-step-crackdown-arrest-activists-82818658
GIST	<p>CAIRO -- Amira Osman, a Sudanese women's rights activist, was getting ready for bed a few minutes before midnight when about 30 policemen forced their way into her home in Khartoum last month.</p> <p>The men, many in plainclothes and armed with Kalashnikov rifles, pistols and batons, banged on her bathroom door, ignoring her mother's pleas to at least allow her to get dressed before they took her away.</p> <p>"It was like they were engaging in a battle or chasing a dangerous terrorist, not a disabled woman," said Osman's sister, Amani, a rights lawyer.</p> <p>Osman, who uses crutches since a 2017 accident, was imprisoned twice under Sudan's former autocratic President Omar al-Bashir for violating strict Islamic laws governing women's behavior and dress. This time, she was detained for speaking out against military rule.</p> <p>With her Jan. 22 arrest, Osman joined hundreds of activists and protest leaders targeted since a military coup last October removed a transitional government from power.</p> <p>The detentions have intensified in recent weeks as Sudan plunged into further turmoil with near-daily street protests, sparking fears of an all-out return to the oppressive tactics of al-Bashir. The coup upended</p>

Sudan's transition to democratic rule after three decades of international isolation under al-Bashir, who was removed from power in 2019 after a popular uprising.

"The military delivers one message to international diplomats, that they are interested in a political dialogue and fundamental reform of the state, but then they do nothing to hide their blatant efforts to maintain the status quo and undermine efforts to unseat them," said Cameron Hudson, a former U.S. State Department official and Sudan expert at the Atlantic Council's Africa Center.

Following the coup, security forces launched a deadly crackdown on protesters. They fired live ammunition and tear gas at crowds on the streets and knocked the country's internet and mobile signal offline — all in efforts to keep people from gathering. Around 80 people, mostly young men, have been killed and over 2,200 others injured in the protests, according to a Sudanese medical group.

Sudanese security forces have also been accused of using sexual violence against women taking part in the demonstrations. The ruling, military-led Sovereign Council said a probe was launched into the allegations of rape and gang rape on Dec. 19, after the United Nations called for an investigation. It is not the first time security forces have been accused of using rape — such attacks occurred under al-Bashir and also under the military during the transitional period.

The U.S., U.K., and Norway, along with the European Union, Canada and Switzerland, called the recent pattern "troubling," and urged the release of "all those unjustly detained."

"We remind Sudan's military authorities of their obligations to respect the human rights and guarantee the safety of those detained or arrested and the need to ensure that due process is consistently followed in all cases," the group said in a statement released by the U.S. State Department.

Osman's detention drew condemnation and concern internationally. She was finally released on Sunday.

But for nearly a week after the arrest, her family didn't know where she was held. Then, they received a phone call asking them to send clothes to a prison in Khartoum's twin city, Omdurman, according to her sister, who also is her lawyer.

Osman said she spent the first three days in solitary confinement in "very bad and humiliating conditions." Then another activist, Eman Mirghani, joined her in the cell. Mirghani remains in detention.

Authorities accused Osman of possession of illegal weapons and ammunition — the "five old bullets" found in her wardrobe, she said, souvenirs from the 2016 national shooting championship in which she competed.

It's unclear who the officers are who stormed Osman's house. During the raid, they said they were from a drug-combating force, but Amani Osman, the sister-lawyer, said she believes they were actually from the country's feared General Intelligence Service.

Formerly known as the National Intelligence and Security Service, the agency was for decades a tool used by al-Bashir's government to clamp down on dissent. After the coup, the military reinstated the agency's powers, which include detaining people without informing their families. They are known to keep many of their detainees in secret prisons called "Ghost Houses."

Gibreel Hassabu, a lawyer with the Darfur Bar Association, a legal group that focuses on human rights, said the exact number of those detained across the country is still unknown — a situation reminiscent of al-Bashir's rule.

Hassabu says he knows of over 200 activists and protest leaders detained in the Sudanese capital alone. Many activists were taken from their homes or snatched from the streets, according to documents he provided to The Associated Press.

At least 46 activists are held in Khartoum's Souba Prison, the documents show. Some female activists — including Amira Osman — are sent to the women's prison in Omdurman.

The wave of arrests has expanded following the killing of a senior police officer during a Jan. 13 protest close to the presidential palace in Khartoum. The officer was stabbed to death, according to local media. Security forces raided a Khartoum hospital and arrested six, including an injured protester and women who were visiting him, accusing them of being responsible for the killing.

And on Jan. 29, paramilitary troops from the Rapid Support Forces, another security body with a reputation for brutality, grabbed Mohamed Abdel-Rahman Naqdalla, an activist and physician, from a Khartoum street, his family said.

A spokesman for the RSF did not answer requests for comment. The force is largely comprised of former militiamen and has been implicated in atrocities under al-Bashir in the the western region of Darfur. It is headed by the country's second most powerful general, Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, and runs its own detention centers in Khartoum and elsewhere in the country.

This week, authorities rearrested Khalid Omar, a minister in the ousted transitional government. Omar had been detained in the Oct. 25 coup and was released a month later as part of a deal between the military and civilian leaders. His party, the opposition Sudanese Congress Party, said he was taken Wednesday at the party's headquarters.

Also arrested Wednesday was Wagdi Saleh, a member of a government-run agency tasked with dismantling the legacy of al-Bashir's regime, according to the pro-democracy Forces of Freedom and Change alliance.

The trend has frustrated diplomats working to bring the military and civilian leaders to some sort of an agreement.

"Arbitrary arrests and detention of political figures, civil society activists and journalists undermine efforts to resolve Sudan's political crisis," said Lucy Tamlyn, U.S. chargé d'affaires in Sudan.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/11 High energy prices hit Europe utility bills
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/high-energy-prices-send-europes-businesses-homes-reeling-82819857
GIST	<p>ISTANBUL -- Mehmet Bogday says his jaw dropped when he saw his electricity bill — it was higher than the rent he pays for his Istanbul restaurant selling traditional Turkish wraps, and more than double what he paid a month ago.</p> <p>"This is unsustainable," said Bogday, who owns the Asmali Mescit Durumcusu restaurant. "If it continues this way, we will have to lay off staff. If it continues this way, we won't be able to make this work. We'll either downsize, or close and go sit at home."</p> <p>Spiking energy prices are raising utility bills from Poland to the United Kingdom, leaving people struggling to make ends meet and small businesses uncertain about much longer they can stay afloat. In response, governments across Europe are rushing to pass aid to ease the hit as energy prices drive a record rise in inflation.</p> <p>Nowhere is that squeeze felt more acutely than in Turkey, where inflation has soared to nearly 50% and exorbitant electricity bills are stirring protests and fears about how small businesses, like Bogday's restaurant, can survive.</p> <p>Protests over electricity price hikes broke out across Turkey this week, including some where police fired tear gas to disperse crowds. People are posting their electricity bills on social media to show how costs are</p>

untenable. Shopkeepers are displaying notices decrying high bills on shop windows, while others have gathered outside electric companies and set their bills on fire.

Like the rest of Europe, electricity generation in Turkey requires energy sources that have surged in price, including natural gas, whose supply is low. A huge drop in the value of Turkey's currency is driving the price spike in imported gas.

As Europe's energy demand roared back from the depths of the coronavirus pandemic, it ran up against gas reserves sapped by a cold winter last year, a lack of renewable energy generation over the summer and Russia not selling as much gas as usual to Europe.

Utilities are passing the costs along to customers, and people are getting hit twice: with higher bills at home and rising prices from businesses also paying more for energy.

It's led to a cost-of-living crisis in some places, but especially in Turkey, where households and businesses were already reeling from eye-watering inflation and a currency that lost some 44% of its value last year, eating away savings and making it difficult to buy even basics like food. Authorities then raised electricity tariffs on Jan. 1, spiking prices by 50% for many people and as much as 127% for businesses and high-consumption households.

The leader of Turkey's main opposition party this week joined a torrent of demands to withdraw the price hikes, saying he would not pay his electricity bill until the tariffs are lowered. Kemal Kilicdaroglu also called for reducing taxes on electricity rates.

Faced with mounting criticism, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan made changes this month so the price rises kick in when households use more energy, but it's failed to provide relief. With price hikes threatening to hurt Erdogan ahead of elections next year, his administration has said it's working on a possible readjustment or other measures to help people.

It's something that governments through Europe are doing as rising utility costs draw widespread outcry.

In Britain, energy prices are set to go up by a record 54% — some 700 pounds (\$940) per year — starting in April. The government says customers will get a discount on their bills to be paid back in small installments over the next few years, and most also will get money off another local tax. In total, the government said most people will get about half of the extra cost shaved off.

Likewise, Italian households are bracing for a record 55% increase in electricity and 42% in gas in coming weeks, energy regulators say. That's after prices for electricity rose in October.

To draw attention to the issue, mayors plunged the historic city halls of Rome and Florence into darkness Thursday night. The Italian mayors' association said the government's response so far has been insufficient to help cities confront hundreds of millions in additional energy costs, making them choose between balancing budgets or cutting services.

Premier Mario Draghi this week said Italy's government was determined to draw up broad measures in coming days that will provide relief to “families and businesses that face difficulties due to the increase in electric energy.”

Polish regulators approved energy prices going up by 37% this year, pinching bakeries and other businesses to the point many had to close.

The right-wing government has temporarily lowered taxes on electricity, gas, engine fuels, some food staples and fertilizer. That's expected to cut energy costs for a family of four by some 120 zlotys (26.5 euros) this year. The reductions offset only part of the price hikes, so the government is introducing a bonus to households, ranging from 20 to 1,450 zlotys (4.5 to 320 euros) annually, depending on income.

Businesses say it's not enough to balance their increased costs.

In Turkey, energy woes are aggravated by the president's policies. Erdogan has shunned conventional economic thinking and pressured the central bank to lower interest rates despite inflation at a 20-year high, further pushing up prices.

Numan Kurtulmus, a deputy leader of Erdogan's ruling party, said government support for energy placed "an extraordinary burden" on the treasury, making the price hikes inevitable.

"It has been a heavy bill, we are aware of this," he said, adding that the government was working to bring down inflation.

Kazim Iscen, a painter and decorator in Ankara, said he already has fallen behind on his utility costs and would not be able to pay his electricity bill, which came in "two or three times higher" this month. "I call on the government to have mercy on us," he said.

Cengiz Sur, owner of a bar and restaurant in Istanbul, said he has been unplugging refrigerators and heaters and turning off lights after his power bill this month surpassed his rent.

"We've forgotten about rent and are now trying to figure out how to deal with our electricity bills," he said.

Bendevi Palandoken, head of the Turkey Tradesmen and Artisans Confederation, warned that many businesses will shut down unless the price hikes are withdrawn and special tariffs are set help small businesses.

"I think there will be some retreat from the price hikes," said economist Ozlem Derici Sengul, founder of the Istanbul-based Spinn Consultancy. "I think that to curb the public tension, we may see some action from" government officials.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/11 UK lifts all testing for vaccinated travelers
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/uk-lifts-testing-requirements-vaccinated-travelers-82821135
GIST	<p>LONDON -- Vaccinated travelers can enter Britain without taking any coronavirus tests starting Friday, after the government scrapped one of the final restrictions imposed over the past two years in response to COVID-19.</p> <p>British residents and visitors who have had at least two doses of an approved coronavirus vaccine now only need to fill out a passenger locator form before traveling to the U.K. Unvaccinated people still have to take tests both before and after arriving but no longer need to self-isolate until they get a negative result.</p> <p>Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said the U.K. "now has one of the most free-flowing borders in the world — sending a clear message that we are open for business."</p> <p>Airlines and other travel firms hailed the change as a lifeline after two years of severely constricted travel. Andrew Flintham, managing director of travel group Tui UK, said there was "a huge pent-up demand for international travel," and people were rushing to book getaways for the February school break and April's Easter holiday.</p> <p>Gatwick, London's second-busiest airport, said that it plans next month to reopen the second of its two terminals, shuttered since June 2020.</p> <p>British Airways chief executive Sean Doyle urged other countries to follow Britain's "pragmatic approach."</p>

But some scientists worry the government is moving too fast. Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government lifted most domestic rules last month. Face masks are no longer mandatory in most indoor spaces in England, vaccine passports for gaining entry to nightclubs and large-scale events were scrapped, as was the official advice to work from home. Other parts of the U.K. — Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland — have also lifted most restrictions.

Johnson announced this week that he hopes to lift the final restriction — mandatory self-isolation for people who test positive — by the end of February as part of a plan to live long-term with COVID-19. Officials have said the government plans to switch from legal restrictions to advisory measures and treat the coronavirus more like the flu as it becomes endemic in the country.

Scientists expressed surprise at Johnson's announcement. Tim Spector, an epidemiologist at Kings College London, said it was "more a political type of statement rather than a scientific one."

"There is some rationale to this and other countries are doing things similar, but it's clearly a race for the government to say that 'Britain is first, Britain is the first to come out of this, Britain has conquered omicron, our booster program is world beating etc, etc,'" he told Times Radio.

The re-opening came as statistics showed the U.K. economy grew by a bigger-than-expected 7.5% in 2021, despite an omicron-driven slowdown at the end of the year. The re-imposition of some restrictions in response to the highly transmissible variant brought a 0.2% contraction in December.

The Office for National Statistics said the growth follows a 9.4% contraction in 2020 as the pandemic shut down big chunks of the economy. The U.K. economy is now back to the size it was in February 2020, just before the new coronavirus swept the U.K.

Britain has Europe's highest coronavirus toll after Russia, with more than 159,000 officially recorded deaths. The country has seen a drop in both new infections and COVID-19 patients admitted to hospitals since the peak of the omicron spike in early January.

Officials have credited the government's booster jab program with preventing the surge in omicron cases from causing serious stress to U.K. hospitals. In Britain, 84.6% of people 12 and up have had two doses of a vaccine and almost two-thirds have had a third, booster shot.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/11 Iran 43rd anniversary Islamic Revolution
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/iranians-celebrate-43rd-anniversary-islamic-revolution-82819065
GIST	<p>TEHRAN, Iran -- Thousands of cars and motorbikes paraded in celebration of the 43rd anniversary of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution on Friday, although fewer pedestrians were out for a second straight year due to concerns over the coronavirus pandemic.</p> <p>In the capital Tehran, processions started out from several points, converging on the usual meetup point at Azadi Square. State media said hundreds of thousands of people were involved in the celebrations, and state TV showed crowds in many cities and towns.</p> <p>The anniversary comes as negotiations to revive Tehran's tattered nuclear deal with world powers continue in Vienna. Former President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the deal in 2018 and re-imposed sanctions, and in response Iran gradually reneged on its commitments.</p> <p>President Ebrahim Raisi said Iran was seeking a balanced foreign policy, but would take "big steps" to further economic independence. "We never pinned hopes to Vienna and New York," he said in a speech before Friday prayers in northern Tehran's Mosalla Mosque.</p>

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said on Wednesday that a deal is “in sight,” but warned that “if it’s not reached in the coming weeks Iran’s nuclear advances will make it impossible” for the U.S. to return to the deal.

Crowds waved Iranian flags, chanting slogans and carrying placards that read “Death to America” and “Death to Israel” in celebration on Friday, a commemoration for the uprising that ousted a Western-backed monarchy and brought the Islamists to power. Several groups in Tehran and elsewhere burned U.S. and Israeli flags, a regular ritual at Iranian rallies.

It was the second year where celebrations were largely limited to vehicles due to the pandemic. Authorities say the aggressive omicron variant is now dominant in the country, and hospitals have been urged to prepare for a new wave of infections.

With more than 130,000 total deaths according to official numbers, Iran has the highest national death toll in the Middle East. It says it has vaccinated some 80% of its population above age 18 with two shots, although only 27% of that group has had a third shot.

Iran’s Islamic Revolution began with widespread unrest over the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The shah, terminally and secretly ill with cancer, fled Iran in January 1979. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini then returned from exile and the government fell on Feb. 11, 1979, after days of mass demonstrations and confrontations between protesters and security forces.

In April 1979, Iranians voted to become an Islamic Republic, a Shiite theocracy with Khomeini as the country’s first supreme leader, with final say on all matters of state.

When the U.S. later allowed the shah into the United States for cancer treatment in New York, anger boiled over in Tehran leading to the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in November 1979 by militant students. The subsequent hostage crisis kindled decades of enmity.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Jobless claims fall 3rd straight week
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Business/wireStory/jobless-claims-fall-straight-week-82797861
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON -- The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits declined for the third straight week.</p> <p>Jobless claims fell by 16,000 to 223,000 last week, from 239,000 the previous week, the Labor Department reported Thursday.</p> <p>The four-week average for claims, which compensates for weekly volatility, declined by 2,000 to 253,250 after rising for five straight weeks as the omicron variant of the coronavirus spread, disrupting business in many parts of the U.S.</p> <p>Last week, the Labor Department reported a surprising burst of hiring in January, with employers adding 467,000 jobs. It also revised upward its estimate for job gains in November and December by a combined 709,000. The unemployment rate edged up to a still-low 4% from 3.9%, as more people began looking for work, but not all of them securing jobs right away.</p> <p>In total, 1.6 million Americans were collecting jobless aid the week that ended Jan. 29, essentially flat from the previous week.</p> <p>Even as omicron variant spread quickly earlier this winter, employers have been eager to hire, a sign of a resilient economy. That winter spike in infections briefly tripped up the country’s strong recovery from 2020’s virus-caused recession, but employers appear confident in long-term growth.</p>

	<p>Massive government spending and the vaccine rollout jumpstarted the economy as employers added a record 6.4 million jobs last year. The U.S. economy expanded 5.7% in 2021, growing last year at the fastest annual pace since a 7.2% surge in 1984, also coming after a recession.</p> <p>An overheated U.S. economy has spawned inflation not seen in four decades, leading the Federal Reserve to ease its support for the economy. The Fed has signaled that it would begin a series of interest-rate hikes in March, reversing pandemic-era policies that have fueled hiring and growth but also stubborn inflation.</p> <p>The government also reported Thursday that consumer prices rose 7.5% in the past 12 months, the steepest year-over-year increase since February 1982.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/10 Truck bridge blockade shuts auto plants
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/truck-blockade-us-canadian-border-shuts-auto-plants-82799596
GIST	<p>TORONTO -- The truck blockade by Canadians protesting the country's COVID-19 restrictions is tightening the screws on the auto industry, forcing Ford, General Motors and other car companies to shut down plants or otherwise scale back production on both sides of the U.S. border.</p> <p>The bumper-to-bumper demonstration by the self-proclaimed Freedom Convoy entered its fourth day Thursday at the Ambassador Bridge connecting Windsor, Ontario, to Detroit, disrupting the flow of auto parts and other products between the two countries.</p> <p>With political and economic pressure mounting, Windsor Mayor Drew Dilkens announced the city will seek a court injunction to end the occupation by scores of truck drivers.</p> <p>"The economic harm is not sustainable and it must come to an end," he said.</p> <p>Meanwhile, the U.S. braced for the possibility of similar truck-borne protests inspired by the Canadians, and authorities in Paris and Belgium banned road blockades to head off disruptions there, too.</p> <p>The U.S. Department of Homeland Security said in a bulletin to local and state law enforcement agencies that it has received reports that truckers are planning to "potentially block roads in major metropolitan cities" in a protest against vaccine mandates and other issues.</p> <p>The agency said the convoy could begin in Southern California as early as this weekend, possibly disrupting traffic around the Super Bowl, and reach Washington in March in time for the State of the Union, according to a copy of Tuesday's bulletin obtained by The Associated Press.</p> <p>The ban on road blockades in Europe and the threat of prison and heavy fines were likewise prompted by online chat groups that have been calling on drivers to converge on Paris starting Friday night and to continue on to Brussels on Monday.</p> <p>The Ambassador Bridge is the busiest U.S.-Canadian border crossing, carrying 25% of all trade between the two countries, and the effects of the blockade there were felt rapidly.</p> <p>Ford said its Windsor, Ontario, engine plant reopened Thursday after being shut down on Wednesday because of a lack of parts. But the factory and the company's assembly plant in Oakville, Ontario, near Toronto, were operating at reduced capacity, the automaker said.</p> <p>On the U.S. side, GM canceled the second shift on Wednesday and the first and second on Thursday at its SUV factory outside Lansing, Michigan.</p> <p>Toyota said three of its plants in Ontario, Canada, closed for the rest of the week because of parts shortages, and production also had to be curtailed in Georgetown, Kentucky.</p>

Workers on the morning shift at a Windsor minivan plant operated by Stellantis, formerly Fiat Chrysler, were sent home early.

Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer urged Canadian authorities to quickly resolve the standoff, saying: “It’s hitting paychecks and production lines. That is unacceptable.”

Hundreds of demonstrators in trucks have also paralyzed the streets of downtown Ottawa for almost two weeks now and maintained blockades at two border crossings besides Windsor — at Coutts, Alberta, opposite Montana, and at Emerson, Manitoba, across from North Dakota.

The protesters are decrying vaccine mandates for truckers and other COVID-19 restrictions and railing against Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, even though many of Canada's precautions, such as mask rules and vaccine passports for getting into restaurants, theaters and other places, were enacted by provincial authorities, not the federal government, and are already rapidly being lifted as the omicron surge levels off.

Trudeau continued to stand firm against lifting vaccine mandates, including a requirement that all truck drivers entering the country be fully vaccinated.

But because an estimated 90% of the nation’s truck drivers are already vaccinated, some conservatives have called on Trudeau to drop the mandate.

The convoy has been promoted and cheered on by many Fox News personalities and attracted support from the likes of former President Donald Trump and Texas Sen. Ted Cruz.

The Associated Press identified more than a dozen Facebook groups encompassing roughly a half-million members that are being used to drum up support for the Canadian protests or plan similar ones in the U.S. and Europe.

To get around the blockade and into Canada, truckers in the Detroit area have had to drive 70 miles north to Port Huron, Michigan, and cross the Blue Water Bridge, where there was a 4½-hour delay leaving the U.S.

Pandemic restrictions have been far stricter in Canada than in the U.S., but Canadians have largely supported them. Canada’s COVID-19 death rate is one-third that of the U.S.

Canada's opposition Conservative Party began calling for the blockades to end after its lawmakers initially supported the protests. Trudeau accused the Conservatives of endorsing and enabling the demonstrations.

[Return to Top](#)

Cyber Awareness

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Official: Google Analytics violates GDPR
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/french-data-protection-authority-says-google-analytics-is-in-violation-of-gdpr/
GIST	<p>The French national data protection authority, CNIL, issued a formal notice to managers of an unnamed local website today arguing that its use of Google Analytics is in violation of the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation, following a similar decision by Austria last month.</p> <p>The root of the issue stems from the website’s use of Google Analytics, which functions as a tool for managers to track content performance and page visits. CNIL said the tool’s use and transfer of personal data to the U.S. fails to abide by landmark European regulations because the U.S. was deemed to not have equivalent privacy protections.</p> <p>European regulators including CNIL have been investigating such complaints over the last two years, following a decision by the EU’s top court that invalidated the U.S.’s “Privacy Shield” agreement on data</p>

transfers. NOYB, the European Center for Digital Rights, reported 101 complaints in 27 member states of the EU and 3 states in the European Economic Area against data controllers who conduct the transatlantic transfers.

Privacy Shield, which went into effect in August of 2016, was a “self-certification mechanism for companies established in the United States of America,” according to CNIL.

Originally, the Privacy Shield was considered by the European Commission to be a sufficient safeguard for transferring personal data from European entities to the United States. However, in 2020 the adequacy decision was reversed due to no longer meeting standards.

An equivalency test was used to compare European and U.S. regulations which immediately established the U.S.’s failure to protect the data of non-U.S. citizens. European citizens would remain unaware that their data is being used and how it is being used, and they cannot be compensated for any misuse of data, CNIL found.

CNIL concluded that Google Analytics does not provide adequate supervision or regulation, and the risks for French users of the tool are too great.

“Indeed, if Google has adopted additional measures to regulate data transfers within the framework of the Google Analytics functionality, these are not sufficient to exclude the possibility of access by American intelligence services to this data,” CNIL said.

The unnamed site manager has been given a month to update its operations to be in compliance with GDPR. If the tool cannot meet regulations, CNIL suggests transitioning away from the current state of Google Analytics and replacing it with a different tool that does not transmit the data.

The privacy watchdog does not call for a ban of Google Analytics, but rather suggests revisions that follow the guidelines. “Concerning the audience measurement and analysis services of a website, the CNIL recommends that these tools be used only to produce [anonymous](#) statistical data, thus allowing an [exemption from consent](#) if the data controller ensures that there are no illegal transfers,” the watchdog said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Cyberattack disrupts Slovenia TV station
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/cyber-attack-disrupts-slovenias-top-tv-station/
GIST	<p>A cyber-attack has disrupted the operations of Pop TV, Slovenia’s most popular TV channel, in an incident this week believed to be an extortion attempt.</p> <p>The attack, which took place on Tuesday, impacted Pop TV’s computer network and prevented the company from showing any computer graphics for the evening edition of 24UR, the station’s daily news show.</p> <p>The night edition of the same show was canceled altogether, although a truncated version of the news aired on the company’s website, Pop TV said in a statement on Tuesday, the day of the attack.</p> <p>But while news broadcasts were restored by the next day, the attack also impacted other parts of the network’s operation.</p> <p>In a second statement on Wednesday, Pop TV said the attack also hit some of its web servers, including VOYO, an on-demand streaming platform that offers channels from its parent company, along with licensed movies and TV series.</p>

	<p>The company said the attack prevented its staff from adding new content to the platform and streaming any of its channels and live sporting events, such as the Winter Olympics, which angered many of its paid subscribers.</p> <p>Local news outlet cites extortion attempt</p> <p>A 24UR spokesperson did not return a request for comment seeking details about the nature of the incident, but fellow Slovenian news outlet Zurnal24 reported that Pop TV was being extorted by foreign hackers in what appears to be a ransomware-like attack.</p> <p>Slovenia's Computer Emergency Response Team, SI-CERT, issued a statement as well, confirming it was working with the TV station to deal with the attack, but refused to share any other details.</p> <p>Over the past few years, several major TV stations have been hit by cyber-attacks, including the likes of France's M6 (October 2019), The Weather Channel (April 2019), the Cox Media Group (June 2021), the Sinclair Broadcast Group in the US (October 2021), Portugal's SIC (January 2021), and Iran's IRIB (February 2021).</p> <p>Excluding the IRIB incident, most of these were ransomware attacks that hit the stations' backend IT infrastructure, causing broadcasts to go offline for hours while engineers worked to restore systems, meaning that Pop TV got off easier than most of the previous cases.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Sharp SIM swapping spike: \$68M losses
SOURCE	https://threatpost.com/sharp-sim-swapping-spike-losses/178358/
GIST	<p>SIM-swapping – the practice of duping mobile carriers into switching a target's phone services to an attacker-controlled phone – is on the rise, the Feds are warning – leading to millions in losses for consumers who found their bank accounts drained and other accounts taken over.</p> <p>Subscriber Identity Modules (SIMs) are small chips inside mobile phones that allow the carrier to identify and register subscriber devices – a requirement to provide service to them. Most SIM-swapping attacks take the form of social engineering, where the criminals impersonate victims and convince customer-service agents to change over victims' services to new phones that they control.</p> <p>Once the service has been redirected, the crooks have access to any of the victims' calls, texts, voicemails and saved profile data, which allows them to send "Forgot Password" or "Account Recovery" requests to the victim's email, which enables them to easily defeat two-factor authentication that uses one-time passcodes and thus to crack high-value accounts.</p> <p>While SIM-swapping (aka SIM-jacking) isn't a new practice, the attacks now seem to be accelerating at a rapid clip: Last year, the FBI Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) received 1,611 SIM swapping complaints with adjusted losses stemming from resulting account takeovers and data theft totaling more than \$68 million, it said this week. In contrast, for the entire three-year period between January 2018 to December 2020, there were just 320 SIM-swapping complaints, with adjusted losses of approximately \$12 million.</p> <p>SIM-Swapping: All Too Easy</p> <p>It's usually not a difficult plan to execute successfully, given that many carriers don't ask in-depth security questions that fully verify that the caller is in fact the legitimate cell phone user. Often, the challenge questions can be answered with previously phished information or even with public information found on social-media sites.</p> <p>The epidemic of large-scale data breaches also contributes to the gambit's high rate of success, according to Chris Clements, vice president of solutions architecture at Cerberus Sentinel.</p>

“When people wonder what the consequences of large-scale data breaches are, this is exactly it,” he noted via email. “Both people and companies have become conditioned to being able to verify identity through simple questions like Social Security number or mother’s maiden name. Unfortunately, this falls apart completely when data breaches affecting millions of people routinely occur.”

Other attack vectors include phishing and insider-threat avenues. For instance, when it came to light in 2019 that Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey was the victim of a SIM swap, the New York Times [reported](#) that “hacking crews have paid off phone company employees to do...switches for them, often for as little as \$100 for each phone number.” Again, this type of accomplice-cultivation isn’t unusual – it [even resulted in a lawsuit](#) for AT&T in 2018.

SIM-swapping is not just happening in the United States, either: The Spanish National Police, for instance, this week [busted open](#) a SIM-swapping ring that got around carriers’ photo-based account verification by using non-original photos of victims to request swaps.

Protection Responsibility Lies with Carriers

There’s very little that end users can do to avoid becoming victims of SIM-jacking jerks (although the FBI recommends a few protection steps, below). Primarily, it’s the mobile phone company’s responsibility to keep its house in order, researchers said.

“All organizations, but especially service providers must move from more simplistic means of validating identity to more sophisticated ones,” Cerberus’ Clements said. “PIN codes unique to each user’s account can be one way of adding additional security to the process. ‘Out of wallet’ questions are another alternative that works by verifying much harder to compromise information such as last three home addresses or cars. It may be more of a hassle for everyone, but it’s simply no longer viable to rely on information that has been routinely compromised to validate a person’s identity.”

Another best practice that all businesses can implement is to move on from SMS-based 2FA, others said.

“SIM-swapping attacks have been going on for over a decade and have likely resulted in billions in stolen cryptocurrency and other financial crime,” Roger Grimes, data-driven defense evangelist at KnowBe4, said via email. “SMS-based MFA has to be the most popular MFA option used on the internet, and most of the time, people do not have a choice of whether to use it or not. Their bank, vendor or service says they have to use it. And, let me say again, the U.S. government has said not to use it since 2017. The better question to ask is why so many services and vendors are still using SMS-based and phone-number based MFA five years after the U.S. government said not to use it? Why are we so slow and broken?”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/11 Half global emails in 2021 were spam
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/half-of-global-emails-were-spam-in/
GIST	<p>Nearly half of emails destined for inboxes in 2021 were classed as spam, with Russia the biggest culprit, according to Kaspersky.</p> <p>In its new Spam and Phishing in 2021 report, the Russian AV company revealed that it detected spam rates at an average of 46% over the year, peaking at 48% in June. Most of it came from machines in Russia (25%), followed by Germany (14%), the US (10%) and China (9%).</p> <p>The vendor said it blocked over 148 million malicious email attachments in 2021, with credential-stealing Trojans from the Agensla family the most common type, accounting for 9% of the total.</p> <p>Kaspersky’s anti-phishing technology blocked over 253 million phishing attempts during the year, and the firm claimed that 8% of global users faced at least one such attack.</p> <p>Brazilian (12%), French (12%) and Portuguese (11%) users were the most frequently targeted by attackers.</p>

Most commonly spoofed in phishing attacks were online stores (18%), internet portals (17%) and payment systems (13%).

WhatsApp accounted for the vast majority (90%) of phishing messages detected in 2021, followed by Telegram and Viber (both 5%). Kaspersky claimed to have blocked a total of 342,000 such attempts.

Corporate users were most frequently exposed to credential-stealing phishing attacks, with emails usually disguised as business correspondence or notifications about work documents that required the recipient's attention.

Also used as lures were fake notifications about meetings in Microsoft Teams or messages about important documents sent via SharePoint for salary payment approval, Kaspersky revealed.

However, COVID-19 remained a persistent theme for phishers during the year.

"In particular, we detected notifications about compensation allocated by the government to employees of certain companies. All they needed to do in order to avail of this promised support was to 'confirm' their email address by logging in to their account on the scam website," Kaspersky explained.

"Another malicious mailshot utilized emails with an attached HTML file called 'Covid Test Result.' Recipients who tried to open the file were taken to a scam website where they were prompted to enter the username and password for their Microsoft account."

The trend is likely to continue into 2022 as long as the pandemic remains a critical issue for businesses and employees.

"Given remote and hybrid working arrangements are here to stay, the demand for corporate accounts on various platforms is unlikely to wane. The topic of COVID-19 vaccination status will also remain relevant," the report concluded.

"Due to the intensity of the measures being imposed in different countries to stop the spread of the virus, we'll more than likely see a surge in the number of forged documents up for sale on the dark web, offering unrestricted access to public places and allowing holders to enjoy all the freedoms of civilization."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 FritzFrog botnet returns; high infection rate
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/fritzfrog-botnet-grows-10x-hits-healthcare-edu-and-govt-systems/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>The FritzFrog botnet that's been active for more than two years has resurfaced with an alarming infection rate, growing ten times in just a month of hitting healthcare, education, and government systems with an exposed SSH server.</p> <p>Discovered in August 2020, the malware is written in Golang and is considered to be a sophisticated threat that relies on custom code, runs in memory, and is decentralized -- peer-to-peer (P2P), so it does not need a central management server.</p> <p>Researchers at internet security company Akamai spotted a new version of the FritzFrog malware, which comes with interesting new functions, like using the Tor proxy chain.</p> <p>The new botnet variant also shows indications that its operators are preparing to add capabilities to target WordPress servers.</p> <p>Next-gen trouble Akamai calls FritzFrog a "next-generation" botnet because it combines features that make it stand out from other threats in the same category.</p>

The malware is better equipped to evade detection and keep a low profile due to using a "completely proprietary" P2P protocol for communications.

It relies on an extensive dictionary for brute-force attacks to find SSH credentials, which allows it to compromise a larger number of devices.

FritzFrog is constantly updating the list of targets and breached machines are constantly updated and its node distribution system ensures an equal number of targets to each node to keep the botnet balanced.

Second wave with new abilities

Akamai global network of sensors detected 24,000 attacks but the botnet claimed only 1,500 victims so far. Most of the infected hosts are in China, but among the compromised systems are in a European TV network, a Russian healthcare firm, and various universities in East Asia.

The actors have implemented a filtering list to skip low-powered devices such as Raspberry Pi boards, while the malware now contains code that lays the groundwork for targeting WordPress sites.

Considering that the botnet is known for cryptocurrency mining, this function is a curious addition. However, [Akamai assumes](#) that the actors have found other monetization avenues, such as deploying ransomware, or data leaks. Currently, this capability is inactive as it is being worked on.

The researchers note that FritzFrog is constantly under development, bugs being fixed on a daily basis, sometimes multiple times a day.

Another novelty in the latest FritzFrog sample is proxying outgoing SSH connections through Tor, obscuring the network structure and limiting the visibility from infected nodes to the botnet network. Although this feature looks complete, the developers have yet to activate it.

Finally, the copying system (used to infect new systems) is now based on SCP (security copy protocol), replacing the *cat* command present in the previous version.

Clues point to operators in China

At this time, the threat analysts at Akamai don't have a definitive attribution for the operation of FritzFrog, but the evidence points to China.

Because the malware incorporates unique code components, some can be traced to unique GitHub repositories set up by Shanghai-based users.

Moreover, the wallet addresses linked to the second campaign's mining operations were also used in the Mozi botnet, which was eventually confirmed to originate from China.

Finally, roughly 37% of all of FritzFrog's active nodes are located in China, which may mean that the actor operates from there.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Georgia voter information exposed online
SOURCE	https://www.govtech.com/security/georgia-voter-info-posted-online-after-software-company-breach?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>(TNS) — A data breach of the voting software company EasyVote Solutions exposed Georgia voters' registration information on the internet, the company confirmed Tuesday.</p> <p>Public information about voters was posted to an online forum, but the breach didn't involve Social Security numbers or driver's license numbers, said Charles Davis, chief financial officer for EasyVote. Voter registration information can include names, addresses, races and dates of birth.</p>

EasyVote's software isn't connected to Georgia voter registration computers. EasyVote doesn't generate or count ballots, and it's not used for election results.

The company, based in Woodstock, provides software that streamlines voter check-ins during early voting in dozens of counties across Georgia, including Fulton, Oconee and Paulding counties. The software uses local voter registration to print out filled-in election applications for voters when they arrive at the polls, instead of requiring voters to complete paperwork by hand.

Voter information may have been obtained from an EasyVote online storage location, Davis said. It's unclear how many voters were affected by the breach, which EasyVote learned about on Jan. 31.

"Upon learning that the files had been made available, EasyVote immediately started an investigation," Davis said. "EasyVote quickly disabled access to that storage location and transferred the data to a new environment with additional security controls."

The Georgia voter registration system remains secure, according to the secretary of state's office.

"EasyVote is not part of Georgia's voting system. They are a vendor that some counties use to assist them with voter check-in procedures. No part of the state system has been affected," said Ari Schaffer, a spokesman for the secretary of state's office.

EasyVote contacted law enforcement and is working with a cybersecurity firm, Davis said. The company is reviewing the files to determine the extent of the information that may have been exposed.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Calif. community college data compromised
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/californian-college-ransomware/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Data belonging to a California community college has been compromised in a "sophisticated" cyber-attack.</p> <p>Threat actors struck the Ohlone Community College District (OCCD) network in Fremont on January 20 2022, disrupting access to certain files. School officials said the private information of some staff, faculty and current and former students, was compromised.</p> <p>Social Security numbers, dates of birth, driver's license numbers, US alien registration numbers, medical information and bank account details were among the information potentially compromised during the attack.</p> <p>Other data that may impacted included health insurance information, student ID number, race/ethnicity, class list, course schedule, disciplinary file, grades, transcripts and/or IEP/504 plan information.</p> <p>The online student portal was down for 17 days, and Ohlone College's phone and email systems were knocked offline for 10 days. A separate student information system was also impacted.</p> <p>Ohlone Community College District is a multi-campus single community college district located in the southern portion of the San Francisco Bay in California. Through its main campus in Fremont and its Center for Health Sciences and Technology in Newark, as well as online, OCCD serves around 16,000 students per year.</p> <p>In a statement released February 4, superintendent/president of OCCD, Eric Bishop, said an unknown party had accessed "certain portions of our network" and that an investigation had been launched into the security incident.</p>

	<p>“The college continues working with third-party specialists to investigate how this incident occurred and what impact it had on our systems,” said Bishop.</p> <p>He added: “Although we have no evidence of misuse of information, we are proactively notifying individuals with information stored on our network.”</p> <p>The college reported the incident to law enforcement and set up a dedicated assistance line to help individuals affected by the ransomware attack and subsequent data breach. OCCD said that it is offering data breach victims access to free credit monitoring and identity protection services.</p> <p>Since falling prey to the cyber-attack, OCCD has taken action to improve its cybersecurity.</p> <p>“In response to this incident, we changed account passwords and are implementing additional security measures. The college is also reviewing its policies and procedures related to network security,” said OCCD in a statement.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/11 Spain dismantles SIM swapping gang
SOURCE	https://securityaffairs.co/wordpress/127880/cyber-crime/sim-swapping-gang-dismantled.html?web_view=true
GIST	<p>Spanish National Police has arrested eight alleged members of a crime organization who were able to steal money from the bank accounts of the victims through SIM swapping attacks.</p> <p>Crooks conduct SIM swapping attacks to take control of victims’ phone numbers tricking the mobile operator employees into porting them to SIMs under the control of the fraudsters. Once hijacked a SIM, the attackers can steal money, cryptocurrencies and personal information, including contacts synced with online accounts. The criminals could hijack social media accounts and bypass 2FA services based on SMS used by online services, including financial ones.</p> <p>In the case investigated by the Spanish authorities, the cybercriminal obtained personal information and bank details of the victims through malicious messages in which they posed as their bank.</p> <p>The crooks were able to falsify official documents of the victims and use them to trick telephone store employees into providing them a duplicate of SIM cards. Once obtained the SIM cards, they were able to bypass SMS-based 2FA used to access bank accounts and steal the money.</p> <p><i>“Agents of the National Police have dismantled a criminal organization dedicated, presumably, to bank fraud through the duplication of SIM cards.” reads the press release published by the Spanish National Police. “There are eight detainees based in Catalonia and acting throughout Spain who, through malicious messages and posing as a bank, obtained personal information and bank details to access the accounts of the victims whose identity they usurped through the falsification of official documents. With this, they deceived the employees of phone stores to obtain duplicate SIM cards and, in this way, have access to the bank’s security confirmation messages. In this way they could operate in online banking and access bank accounts to empty them after receiving security confirmation messages from the banks.”</i></p> <p>The first SIM swapping attack attributed to this gang took place on March 2021, at the time Spanish police received two complaints about fraudulent transactions in different geographical locations in Spain.</p> <p>Crooks laundered the defrauded money operating through bank transfers and digital instant payment platforms operating from the province of Barcelona.</p> <p>The operation resulted in the arrest of seven people in Barcelona and one in Seville. The police also blocked the bank accounts of the suspects.</p> <p>This week, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reported an escalation in SIM swap attacks aimed at stealing millions from the victims by hijacking their mobile phone numbers.</p>

	<p>The FBI reported that US citizens have lost more than \$68 million to SIM swapping attacks in 2021, the number of complaints since 2018 and associated losses have increased almost fivefold.</p> <p>In 2018, the FBI Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) received complaints for 1,611 SIM swapping attacks, while the number of complaints in the period between 2018 e 2002 was 320 causing a total of losses of \$12 million.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Ransomware attacks critical infrastructure
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/university-project-cataloged-1100-ransomware-attacks-critical-infrastructure?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>A Temple University research project that tracks ransomware attacks on critical infrastructure has documented more than 1,100 incidents to date.</p> <p>SecurityWeek first wrote about the project in September 2020, when the database included roughly 680 records. The latest version of the critical infrastructure ransomware attacks (CIRWA) database catalogs 1,137 incidents reported between November 2013 and January 31, 2022.</p> <p>The database, available for free on request as a Microsoft Excel file, stores information on incidents reported by the media and cybersecurity companies.</p> <p>Records include the name of the targeted organization, year of the attack, location of the targeted organization, targeted sector, duration of the attack, name of the ransomware family, ransom amount, whether the amount was paid and the payment method, the actual amount that was paid, the source of the information, related incidents, and the MITRE ATT&CK technique ID.</p> <p>The project is led by Aunshul Rege, associate professor and director of the CARE Lab at Temple University, and the main contributor is Rachel Bleiman, a PhD student in the university's Criminal Justice program.</p> <p>The database includes 212 records for 2019, 406 records for 2020, and 258 for 2021. While the number of incidents reported in 2021 is significantly lower than in 2020, it does not necessarily mean there were fewer attacks.</p> <p>One possible explanation is that many victims were grouped rather than being reported individually. For instance, the same third-party service provider may have been the point of entry for the attackers, such as in the case of the Kaseya incident, where ransomware was delivered to many organizations, but only the names of a few are publicly known.</p> <p>"Another possibility is that attention was more focused on some attacks (Colonial and JBS) and so there might have been less focus/reporting on other incidents," Rege told <i>SecurityWeek</i>.</p> <p>Looking at the trends for the past few years, the data shows that ransom demands increased considerably in 2020 and 2021 compared to 2018 and 2019. The most frequent ransom demand in 2018/2019 was less than \$5,000, while the most frequent in 2020/2021 exceeded \$5 million.</p> <p><i>Ransom amounts demanded</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2020-2021: Most frequent was more than \$5 million (37). \$1 million or less (25) and \$5 million or less (15) were next most frequent. No cases where the ransom was \$1000 or less • 2018-2019: Most frequent was \$5,000 or less (28). More than \$5 million only had 5 cases. <p><i>Critical infrastructure sector targeted</i></p> <p><i>The top three sectors targeted were healthcare, government, and education, but the number of reported incidents fluctuated.</i></p>

- 2020-2021: Most targeted was healthcare (133), then government (113), then education (87)
- 2018-2019: Most targeted was government (99), then education (53) and healthcare (48).

Rege told *SecurityWeek* that the CIRWA dataset has been requested 925 times by various individuals and organizations around the world. Industry representatives accounted for roughly 29% of requests, followed by students (16%), educators (11%), and government (10%).

While the dataset appears to have been useful to many as it is, the community has suggested adding several other data types, including attack point of entry, threat actor, impact of the attack (other than financial loss due to ransom payment), technical analysis, graphical representations of the data, and distinguishing between the IT and OT aspects of an attack.

“We hope that others in the community can pick these wish list items up and develop new and innovative research trajectories,” Rege said. “The CIRWA dataset is a dynamic entity and the continuous engagement with students, educators, government, and industry will help it develop, grow, and serve the needs of the community.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Malware gang plants incriminating evidence
SOURCE	https://www.theregister.com/2022/02/10/modifiedelephant_evidence_malware/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>For the past decade, unidentified miscreants have been planting incriminating evidence on the devices of human-rights advocates, lawyers, and academics in India seemingly to get them arrested.</p> <p>That's according to SentinelOne, which has named the crew ModifiedElephant and described the group's techniques and targets since 2012 in a report published on Wednesday.</p> <p>"The objective of ModifiedElephant is long-term surveillance that at times concludes with the delivery of 'evidence' – files that incriminate the target in specific crimes – prior to conveniently coordinated arrests," said Tom Hegel, threat researcher at SentinelOne, in a blog post.</p> <p>Hegel said the group has operated for years without attracting the attention of the cybersecurity community because of its limited scope of operations, its regionally-specific targeting, and its relatively unsophisticated tools.</p> <p>ModifiedElephant prefers phishing with malicious Microsoft Office attachments to attack targets, and infect them with Windows malware.</p> <p>In 2013, its messages relied on executable file attachments with deceptive double extensions in the file name (eg filename.pdf.exe). After 2015, the group used .doc, .pps, .docx, .rar, and password protected .rar files. In 2019, its attack vector involved links to hosted malicious files, and the group is also said to have employed large .rar archives to avoid detection.</p> <p>The gang was also observed throwing Android malware at victims.</p> <p>"There's something to be said about how mundane the mechanisms of this operation are," said Juan Andrés Guerrero-Saade, threat researcher at SentinelOne and adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins SAIS, via Twitter. "The malware is either custom garbage or commodity garbage. There's nothing <i>technically</i> impressive about this threat actor, instead we marvel at their audacity."</p> <p>Activist Rona Wilson is said to have been one of those targeted by ModifiedElephant. Wilson was arrested in 2018 with eight others in the Bhima Koregaon case, a violent clash between Hindu nationalists and Dalits. A year ago, Arsenal Consulting, a US-based digital forensics firm, reported that the evidence against Wilson had been planted.</p>

"Arsenal's analysis in this case has revealed that Rona Wilson's computer was compromised for just over 22 months," Arsenal Consulting said in its February 8, 2021 report. "The attacker responsible for compromising Mr. Wilson's computer had extensive resources (including time) and it is obvious that their primary goals were surveillance and incriminating document delivery."

"Arsenal has connected the same attacker to a significant malware infrastructure which has been deployed over the course of approximately four years to not only attack and compromise Mr Wilson's computer for 22 months, but to attack his co-defendants in the Bhima Koregaon case and defendants in other high-profile Indian cases as well."

One of the more serious pieces of evidence in this case – [Ltr_1804_to_cc.pdf](#), which includes details of a purported assassination plot against Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is said to have been placed on Wilson's computer via a NetWire RAT remote session.

Wilson's phone was also [found to have](#) NSO Group's Pegasus spyware on it. He remains in jail, awaiting trial with others arrested at the time. He has been charged under India's Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), an anti-terror law that Amnesty International says, "violates several international human rights standards and circumvents fair trial guarantees."

SentinelOne does not explicitly state that ModifiedElephant acts on behalf of the Indian government but notes how the group's activities are consistent with the government's interests.

"We observe that ModifiedElephant activity aligns sharply with Indian state interests and that there is an observable correlation between ModifiedElephant attacks and the arrests of individuals in controversial, politically-charged cases," wrote Hegel.

According to the report, ModifiedElephant's web infrastructure overlaps with Operation Hangover, a surveillance effort dating back to 2013 against targets of interest to Indian national security. The security firm also said that Wilson had been targeted by a second threat group, known as SideWinder [\[PDF\]](#), which has attacked government, military, and private sector organizations across Asia.

Hegel observes that SentinelOne last year reported on a threat actor operating in and around Turkey, dubbed [EGoManiac](#), that planted incriminating evidence on the devices of journalists to support arrests made by the Turkish National Police.

"Ultimately, this is research with real human cost," [said](#) Guerrero-Saade. "Defendants remain in prison, with one having passed away recently. And there are more that haven't been identified. We can only hope this brings further attention and collaboration to curb this behavior."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 FTC: romance scam losses hit record
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/losses-from-romance-scams-hit-a-record-547-million-in-2021-ftc-says/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>The US Federal Trade Commission on Thursday said that it measured a sharp increase in losses linked to romance scams in 2021, bringing total losses over the last five years to \$1.3 billion.</p> <p>The FTC's Consumer Sentinel Network, which collects reports about identity theft, coronavirus scams, and other schemes, said Americans lost \$547 million to romance scams last year, up from \$307 million in 2020 and \$202 million in 2019. The FTC added that these figures likely only capture a small portion of losses suffered by consumers.</p> <p>"Because the vast majority of frauds are not reported to the government, this figure reflects just a small fraction of the public harm caused by romance scams," the FTC said.</p>

Romance scams can take many forms — more than one-third of the reports collected by the FTC began with a message received on Facebook or Instagram. Scammers may exchange messages with a victim for months to build up trust, and often invent stories about a sick relative or financial crisis to con a victim into transferring money to them. In some scams, victims don't transfer their own money but are unwittingly convinced to act as "money mules," helping to illegally launder stolen funds, the FTC said.

One trend that gained prominence in 2021 was the rise of romance scams that lured people into bogus cryptocurrency investments. About \$139 million in cryptocurrency was lost in romance scams in 2021, according to the FTC, about 5 times what was reported in 2020 and 25 times what was reported in 2019.

Other payment methods that scammers relied on were bank transfer payments (\$121 million), wire transfers (\$93 million), and gift cards (\$36 million).

Although reports about romance scams increased across age groups in 2021, the increase was especially prominent for younger people. The number of reports from victims between the age of 18 and 29 increased more than tenfold between 2017 and 2021. However, victims in that age group lost about \$750 on average to romance scams in 2021, compared to \$9,000 for victims who are 70 and older.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Spy agencies exploit dating apps to recruit
SOURCE	https://www.theregister.com/2022/02/10/spies_using_dating_apps/
GIST	<p>Nations running online foreign influence campaigns have turned to dating apps to recruit people privy to sensitive information, according to the director general of the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the nation's security agency directed against external threats and a key partner in the Five Eyes security alliance.</p> <p>"In the last two years, thousands of Australians with access to sensitive information have been targeted by foreign spies using social media profiles," revealed ASIO supremo Mike Burgess during his third annual threat assessment address on Wednesday.</p> <p>Two years ago, such approaches were most often observed on professional social networking platforms. Burgess said ASIO now needs to track the dating apps Tinder, Bumble and Hinge, because foreign spies have started to use them, too. WhatsApp has also been targeted.</p> <p>Burgess said use of such apps is one reason attempts at foreign interference have become the threat that consumes most ASIO resources – ahead of terror. The director general explained that foreign interference involves "the hidden hand of a foreign state" acting in ways that are contrary to Australia's interests.</p> <p>He then outlined such a campaign that involved "a wealthy individual who maintained direct and deep connections with a foreign government and its intelligence agencies [and] did the bidding of offshore masters, knowingly and covertly seeking to advance the interests of the foreign power."</p> <p>Burgess called this person "the puppeteer" and said he headed "a foreign interference startup" that had a key performance indicator of "secretly shaping the jurisdiction's political scene to benefit the foreign power."</p> <p>The puppeteer planned a campaign to :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hire a local employee who began identifying candidates likely to run in the election and who "either supported the interests of the foreign government or who were assessed as vulnerable to inducements and cultivation."• Plot ways of advancing the candidates' political prospects through generous support, placing favourable stories in foreign language news platforms, and providing other forms of assistance.• Hire PR and marketing agencies to assist the candidate, to create a sense of indebtedness they could later exploit.• Use an offshore bank account to pay for the above.

- Keep the candidate in the dark about the puppeteer's role controlling the employee, and that the foreign government was the source of funds.

ASIO prevented the plot from being executed, but Burgess opined that sometimes such plots work and candidates are elected without knowing the nature of their backers. When that happens, Burgess suggested the following scenario can unfold.

The puppeteer's employee then recommends they hire certain other associates as political staffers. These people are also agents or proxies of the foreign government, and will try to influence the politician, shape decision-making, and help identify other political figures who can be influenced and recruited.

Down the track, the new parliamentarians might be asked for information about the party's position on defence policy, human rights, foreign investment or trade.

This information will be sent to the foreign power without the knowledge of the parliamentarian. At some point, the politicians might be prevailed upon to vote a particular way on a contentious issue, or lobby colleagues to vote a certain way.

Burgess also bemoaned that the internet has become "the world's single most potent and powerful incubator of extremism" and that isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic sent online radicalisation "into overdrive."

One result is a substantial cohort of people with new grievances related to the pandemic and its management by governments.

Online radicalisation efforts conducted by extremist groups has also increased, in ASIO's assessment. And those efforts are increasingly targeting the young.

"A few years ago, minors represented around two to three per cent of our new counter-terrorism investigations," Burgess said. "In the last year, though, the figure's been closer to 15 per cent. And perhaps more disturbingly, these young people are more intense in their extremism."

Burgess's full speech can be found [here](#). The reason for its existence is explained in the text: Burgess witnessed another Australian intelligence agency falsely accused of an illegal act, at considerable cost to individuals and the organisation.

"The affair taught me how difficult it can be for a secret organisation to defend itself, even when it's done nothing wrong – it's assumed that if you're in the shadows, you're shadowy."

Burgess expressed his hope that this speech represents a step into the sunlight that makes the public better appreciate and understand ASIO's work.

[Return to Top](#)

Terror Conditions

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	02/11 ISIS evolves emoji tactics
SOURCE	https://www.politico.eu/article/islamic-state-disinformation-social-media/
GIST	<p>The Islamic State has a new weapon in spreading hate speech and violent content online: the emoji.</p> <p>Over the past two months, Facebook pages in Arabic, Kurdish and English have used these digital images to sidestep Facebook's content rules. Emojis have been used instead of words like "weapon," "explosion" and "rocket" to champion the Islamic State's terrorist attacks across the Middle East and farther afield.</p>

These pages, posing as mainstream media organizations with mundane names like World News and Media Point, have collectively racked up hundreds of thousands of likes, shares and comments, based on research shared with POLITICO.

The fake news outlets are part of a sophisticated digital disinformation campaign that includes deploying different tactics across Facebook pages, Twitter accounts and Telegram channels. Islamic State-affiliated channels, all told, have almost 80,000 followers. Some of the social media content has been available since June 2020, primarily focusing on spreading hate speech in Iraq and Syria by sharing news about ISIS attacks from the group's official mouthpieces.

Much of the ISIS content reviewed by POLITICO is still online — and none of it should be available on social media, based on platforms' own rules against terrorist content.

"They are linked to a wider unofficial ISIS news ecosystem that has figured out specific evasion tactics, even despite [social media] takedowns, to thrive and to continue to do so," said Moustafa Ayad, executive director for Africa, the Middle East and Asia at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a think tank that tracks online extremism. Ayad discovered the terrorist groups across all three platforms and shared his findings with POLITICO.

"ISIS supporters have figured out a way to use multiple platforms in an increasingly sophisticated way," he added. "Why would they develop an emoji code to describe certain things on Facebook and not use that same emoji code on Telegram? It's about using different tactics."

Different tactics for different platforms

The groups are weaponizing blindspots within each social media platforms' content policies to promote a hateful and violent ideology, according to two national security officials and three researchers who track online jihadist material.

For Facebook, that includes replacing terrorist language with emojis. For Twitter, that involves toning down the content in English compared with what's posted in Arabic. For Telegram, it means copying directly from official ISIS material. It's an evolving cat-and-mouse battle with tech companies and national security agencies.

The combination of different platforms also allows jihadist groups to reach the widest possible audience while portraying themselves as part of a legitimate political organization. Alternative networks like Telegram provide a place to coordinate tactics, while a more mainstream platform like Facebook is used to disseminate often toned-down propaganda so that such messaging can circumvent the platform's content-moderation tools.

"They are very sophisticated. They are very aware of what they are doing," said Ayse Deniz Lokmanoglu, a postdoctoral fellow at Northwestern University's Center for Communication and Public Policy.

In response, Facebook declined to comment but said it was investigating the accounts. Representatives for Twitter and Telegram did not respond to requests for comment.

Tech companies, even when they've been slow to remove material from Western extremists, have aggressively removed tens of thousands of accounts with close ties to ISIS, the Taliban or other jihadist groups, often working closely with national security agencies to weed out such material.

It has not always been successful. Internal Facebook documents, made public by Frances Haugen, a company whistleblower, disclosed how the company [repeatedly failed to protect its Arabic-language users](#) from terrorist-related material. In response, Meta, Facebook's parent company, said it had invested heavily in content moderation based in the Middle East.

Still, extremists have quickly evolved to stay ahead of the game, taking advantage of little cooperation between the tech companies to clamp down on campaigns that rely on several social media networks.

Meili Criezis, a graduate fellow at American University's Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab who tracks ISIS online propaganda, said these groups often use backup social media accounts in case their main channels are removed.

"They always have a backup channel that you would be able to link from one to another," added Criezis, who was not associated with the work provided to POLITICO by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, but who independently uncovered part of the same ISIS-linked digital disinformation campaign.

"For ISIS, it's important because they see themselves as a global caliphate. So that's why these media channels, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram, are important to keep on," she said.

Syrian prison break

In late January, ISIS militants [carried out a violent prison break](#) in Hasakah, Syria — and showed their digital disinformation apparatus in action.

On Telegram, the fake media outlets began sharing a specific ISIS hashtag the terrorist group was using to coordinate its messaging around the attack, which led to 10 days of fighting within the Syrian city. They also repurposed photos and other social media content directly from the jihadists' official propaganda machine, often keeping the ISIS logo on the social media posts shared within Telegram.

On Twitter, the Arabic-language accounts were openly supportive of the prison break, both sharing the ISIS hashtag and praising the "Caliphate State." Yet in English, where the social media company's online content tools are more advanced, those accounts were more muted, merely referring to the militants as "Muslims coming together."

On Facebook, the pages relied on their emoji codebook to herald the attack, splicing in the digital images to describe terms associated with ISIS. They also posted a lengthy video of the prison break, which has garnered almost 90,000 views, taken from the viewpoint of the militants as they scattered into the Syrian city.

The accounts, channel and pages on all three social networks repeatedly shared each other's content, as well as that of affiliated social media users who spread the material to a wide online audience.

"What is going on here is something completely new," said Ayad, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue researcher who discovered the network. "It's a multiplatform, multilingual tactic that's using fake news organizations and different content strategies. The goal appears to be to sustain an online presence without being detected."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 French troops, militants clash Burkina Faso
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/france-kills-10-islamist-militants-burkina-faso-2022-02-10/
GIST	<p>PARIS, Feb 10 (Reuters) - Four civilians were caught in cross fire after French troops supported with an attack helicopter killed 10 Islamist militants in Burkina Faso, the French military said in a statement on Thursday.</p> <p>France has thousands of troops operating across the Sahel region as part of a mission to combat violence by Islamist militant groups linked to al Qaeda and Islamic State.</p> <p>But it is considering withdrawing troops from Mali, where relations between Paris and the junta in Bamako have deteriorated.</p> <p>The death of four civilians in Burkina comes at a bad time with anti-French sentiment especially strong in Mali and it beginning to spillover into Burkina after a coup in January.</p>

	<p>"Unfortunately, despite all the measures taken by the Barkhane (French) force and by the unit engaged on the ground, four civilians, present in the terrorist camp, lost their lives during the exchange of fire," the French army said in a statement.</p> <p>It said 10 Ansarul Islam militants were killed after violent clashes during the night of Feb. 7-8, close to the town of Ouahigouya, near the border with Mali.</p> <p>The French military said the group had been behind attacks that killed 53 Burkinabe policemen in November and a recent attack that saw two Burkinabe soldiers killed.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/10 British woman jailed for extremist material
SOURCE	https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-birmingham-60338558
GIST	<p>A woman convicted of terrorism offences after sharing extreme videos has been jailed for five-and-a-half years.</p> <p>Aaminah Amatullah, 39, sent images of dead bodies, including children, to an online contact, who was in fact an undercover police officer.</p> <p>Sentencing at Birmingham Crown Court, the judge said he accepted mental health issues and personal problems had played a part in her radicalisation.</p> <p>However, he said, her actions had shown she was "a committed extremist".</p> <p>Amatullah, of Livingstone Road, Handsworth, Birmingham, was convicted in December after denying the charges.</p> <p>The trial was told two videos were sent within four days, including a speech encouraging terrorism by the leader of the group calling itself Islamic State (IS).</p> <p>The videos urged extremists to "target them on the streets," following a battle to retake the IS stronghold of Al-Baghuz in Syria.</p> <p>Judge Paul Farrer QC told Amatullah: "I have no doubt that by 2016 you held an extreme Islamic mindset.</p> <p>"You believed that you were sending [one of the videos] to a female Muslim convert living in Northampton who shared your views.</p> <p>"You intended to encourage terrorism - one of your social media contacts was arrested for terrorist offences in the Philippines."</p> <p>He also told the court he accepted she had been suffering from an emotionally unstable personality disorder, as well as anxiety and depression at the time.</p> <p>"I accept that history and conclude that your vulnerability may well have played a part in your radicalisation," he said.</p> <p>But he added: "Your actions demonstrated that you are a committed extremist."</p> <p>"We cannot underestimate the dangerous nature of extremist propaganda and the influence it can have," Ch Supt Kenny Bell, from the West Midlands Counter-Terrorism unit, said.</p> <p>"Communities defeat terrorism, and it remains vitally important that the public reports any suspicious activity to police."</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/10 Biden rejects critical senior military reports
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/02/10/biden-afghanistan-evacuation-investigation/
GIST	<p>President Biden on Thursday said he is “rejecting” the accounts of senior U.S. military commanders who told Army investigators that administration officials did not grasp the rise of the Taliban last year or how quickly the United States needed to prepare to launch an evacuation operation in Afghanistan.</p> <p>Biden said in an interview with NBC News that it did not ring true to him that administration officials ignored warning signs or were in denial about the situation.</p> <p>“No,” Biden said. “No. That’s not what I was told.”</p> <p>The president, pressed on whether he was rejecting the accounts in the reports, said he was.</p> <p>“Yes, I am,” Biden said. “I am rejecting them.”</p> <p>The president addressed the issue after The Washington Post first reported Tuesday that the top U.S. commander on the ground during the evacuation, Rear Adm. Peter Vasely, and other military leaders involved told investigators that senior White House and State Department officials lacked a sense of urgency as the Taliban advanced on Kabul and for weeks resisted efforts by the Pentagon to prepare for the evacuation of embassy personnel and Afghan allies before the Aug. 15 fall of Kabul.</p> <p>The criticism from military officials appeared in a U.S. Army investigative report numbering about 2,000 pages. The documents, obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, detail life-or-death decisions encountered by U.S. service members who were ordered to secure Hamid Karzai International Airport for what became a relentless 17-day operation. Days before the mission concluded, an Islamic State-Khorasan bomber attacked U.S. troops and Afghan civilians attempting to flee the country just outside the airport on Aug. 26, killing 13 American service members and about 170 Afghans.</p> <p>Biden administration officials have sought to downplay the significance of the report. State Department spokeswoman Jalina Porter said that “cherry-picked comments do not reflect the months of work that were well underway, or the whole picture of what the U.S. diplomats undertook to facilitate the evacuation and relocation of U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents and allies.”</p> <p>Biden on Thursday underscored his belief that it was time to withdraw, even as critics focused instead on the manner in which the United States left Afghanistan. About 600 U.S. troops were in Afghanistan in August, down from 2,500 early last year.</p> <p>“Look, there’s no good time to get out, but if we had not gotten out, they acknowledge that we would have had to put a hell of a lot more troops back in,” Biden said. “It wasn’t just 2,000, 4,000. We would have had to significantly increase the number of troops, and then you’re back in this war of attrition.”</p> <p>After the central government fell, Biden ordered more than 5,000 additional U.S. troops to Afghanistan to assist with the evacuation. Marines and soldiers worked on the perimeter of the airport, screening the crowds for American citizens and Afghan allies who had assisted the 20-year U.S. war.</p> <p>A White House official, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue, said after Biden’s interview that the president took office with a deadline for the U.S. military to withdraw but no plan to do so. (Former president Donald Trump had signed an agreement with the Taliban to remove all U.S. troops by May 2021.)</p> <p>The official said “we immediately went to work planning for every aspect of leaving,” including for an evacuation operation “that eventually helped more than 120,000 individuals fly out of Kabul in a few short weeks.”</p>

	<p>“Those months of extensive preparation, like the deployment of troops in the region, are reflected in the public record and the CENTCOM interviews,” the official said. “We reject any assertion that claims otherwise.”</p> <p>Vasely told investigators that military personnel would have been “much better prepared to conduct a more orderly [evacuation] if policymakers had paid attention to the indicators of what was happening on the ground.”</p> <p>Brig. Gen. Farrell Sullivan, a Marine general overseeing aspects of the operation, told investigators that it was his opinion that the National Security Council “was not seriously planning for an evacuation.”</p> <p>Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said Wednesday that the report shows that a lot of good people across the U.S. government “were working hard under incredibly difficult circumstances to make the best decisions they could in real time,” and that effort was unprecedented.</p> <p>“Nothing like this had been attempted since the end of the Vietnam War,” he said. “Everyone’s heart, up and down the chain, was in the right place.”</p>
Return to Top	Read: Statements from top military officers in Afghanistan evacuation

HEADLINE	02/10 Death toll of raid on ISIS leader in question
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/02/10/islamic-state-raid-qurayshi-civilian-casualties/
GIST	<p>SHARM EL-SHEIKH, Egypt — The building in northwest Syria where U.S. forces found the Islamic State’s leader was probably rigged to explode, according to four U.S. officials with detailed knowledge of the operation, but it remains unclear who inside the home detonated the blast and why the Pentagon’s tally of those killed during last week’s raid differs from that of aid groups that sifted through the rubble in its immediate aftermath.</p> <p>The Pentagon maintains that the Feb. 3 raid on the dwelling in the village of Atma, resulting in the death of Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurayshi, was “exquisitely planned” and undertaken with extreme care to minimize the risk of collateral damage. U.S. officials say Qurayshi or someone else inside triggered the explosion before U.S. troops entered.</p> <p>But military leaders are facing questions about whether additional deaths at the scene documented by UNICEF and similar organizations were avoidable.</p> <p>U.S. officials have counted at least seven deaths in the building, including Qurayshi and three family members they say were with him, at least one of whom was a child. All were killed in the blast, which destroyed much of three-story building’s top floor. U.S. officials count three others who were killed on the building’s second floor, including an aide to Qurayshi, the aide’s wife and a child.</p> <p>Two other adults, whom the Pentagon suspected of having links to a separate terrorist organization, were fatally shot by U.S. forces outside near a separate building while brandishing weapons, military officials say.</p> <p>But aid groups say some of the dead — particularly children — may be going uncounted. On the day of the strike, UNICEF stated that at least six children had been killed in Atma on the night of the strike “due to heavy violence” and that “civilian-populated areas were severely damaged.”</p> <p>Speaking to reporters Thursday, two U.S. military officials closely involved with the operation said it remains unclear why there are discrepancies between the number of children whom U.S. troops counted among the dead and the number reported by aid organizations.</p> <p>“I have not seen anything that leads me to conclude there were a different number of casualties than we’ve seen,” said one of the officials, who like others spoke on the condition of anonymity because the operation</p>

remains highly sensitive. But, he acknowledged, “it was certainly within the realm of possible that there were additional things.”

U.S. forces began planning the raid in September, regularly rehearsing with models, including a full-scale mock-up of the house, the two senior military officials involved in the operation said Thursday. The objective was to take Qurayshi alive, collect any intelligence from the compound “and of course avoid any unnecessary civilian harm,” one of the officials said.

The Pentagon has faced scrutiny for an apparent pattern of conducting errant or overly aggressive attacks, often through the use of powerful airstrikes that have resulted in civilian deaths.

In recent months, defense officials have launched two high-profile investigations of the use of deadly force against civilians, probing an [Aug. 29 strike in Kabul](#) in which a humanitarian aid worker was misidentified as a terrorist and [a March 2019 strike](#) in Baghouz, Syria, that killed dozens during the final days of U.S. operations there against the Islamic State.

Last month, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [directed the Pentagon](#) to devise plans for reducing civilian casualties.

Pentagon officials are acutely aware that the collateral cost of the Qurayshi raid would come under scrutiny. They took pains to emphasize that it was undertaken with a long-range, helicopter-borne ground force — despite the additional complication and risk of such an operation — precisely because senior military leaders wanted to minimize the likelihood of unintentional civilian deaths or injuries.

In the months they spent observing the building, U.S. personnel deemed that no one apart from Qurayshi, his lieutenant and their families had any links to the Islamic State or even were aware the terrorist organization’s leader was living on the residence’s third floor. They determined that “really no one” in the village seemed to be aware of Qurayshi’s presence and that “clearly it was a case of hiding in plain sight,” a senior military official said Thursday.

It is unclear, the military officials said, whether Qurayshi detonated the explosive device or a member of his family did so.

Brian Castner, a former Air Force bomb technician experienced in post-blast assessments and a senior crisis adviser for Amnesty International, said the rubberized tubing visible in photographs of the rubble is commonly used in demolitions. “This is more evidence,” he said, “to the theory that the house may have been rigged up to explode, and only part of it did.”

U.S. officials have yet to conclude whether anyone who did not reside in the building was put at risk because of how the operation evolved once in progress.

“What I am confident of is that we had a good understanding that we did not cause any additional, any noncombatant casualties, to our knowledge,” a senior military official said Thursday, with the caveat that he wanted to have “a little bit of humility” about the scope of the Pentagon’s assessments. He noted that the personnel involved in the raid had only limited time to assess the aftermath of the attack before departing the scene.

The night of the raid, about two dozen U.S. troops, including members of the elite Delta Force, descended on Qurayshi’s adopted hometown around 1 a.m. They were backed by Apache helicopter gunships, attack jets and Reaper drones, which provided aerial surveillance.

U.S. troops first called out to people in the three-story building using a bullhorn. The family on the first floor — a man, a woman and several children — were escorted away from the scene by U.S. troops and turned over to another family nearby for safety, the two U.S. military officials familiar with the operation said. Moments later, the blast collapsed much of the top floor, killing Qurayshi and at least three of his family members, including at least one child, military officials say.

The force of the blast ejected the terrorist leader from the building, according to previous U.S. accounts of the operation. His remains were left at the scene, officials have said.

As U.S. personnel moved through the building, a gunfight transpired on the second floor, where a male fighter and a female fighter — assessed to be Qurayshi's aide and that aide's wife — were killed, military officials say. A child was found dead with them, killed by what U.S. officials surmise was "concussive force" from the blast upstairs — though the cause of death remains unconfirmed.

Four other children who had been on the second floor were saved, the officials said.

Military officials acknowledged they cannot account for whether other exchanges of gunfire resulted in additional civilian casualties. Troops taking part in the raid took incoming fire before entering the building, U.S. officials said Thursday. And at one point, as the raid force attempted to clear the second floor of Qurayshi's building, two armed militants believed to be from a local al-Qaeda-linked group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, appeared outside, officials said. U.S. forces killed them in self-defense, officials said, from their perch in a helicopter above.

Those militants, the officials said, were standing in front of a separate structure at the time. Whether any civilians may have been caught in the crossfire remains unclear, they acknowledged.

"What we don't have is a solid characterization of what every single building was or who lived in every single building," one of the officials said. "That was beyond the scope of our abilities to understand."

The damage done to that structure, about 500 feet south of Qurayshi's residence, was probably caused by 30-millimeter rounds, according to Mark Hiznay, associate arms director for Human Rights Watch, who examined imagery of the aftermath. The cannon firing those rounds, formally referred to as a M230 chain gun, typically is used to target personnel and light armored vehicles, he said.

Asked about video footage, the U.S. military officials said that little exists showing what happened once the raid force landed, because those resources were focused on scanning the area for additional threats to U.S. personnel, not on documenting what transpired at the house.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Panel approves transfer Gitmo detainee
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/us/politics/hassan-abdullah-al-sharbi-quantanamo-bay.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — A U.S. government review panel on Thursday approved the release with security guarantees of a Saudi prisoner at Guantánamo Bay who was captured in Pakistan and held as a suspected bomb maker.</p> <p>The decision in the case of Ghassan Abdullah al-Sharbi, who has been held for nearly 20 years, means most of the 39 detainees at the wartime prison have now been cleared for transfer, but must wait for U.S. diplomats to reach security agreements with countries willing to take them in.</p> <p>Mr. al-Sharbi, 47, was of particular interest to the United States because, according to a U.S. intelligence profile, he had taken flight school courses in Phoenix with two men who would become hijackers in the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. He had also obtained an engineering degree, attended Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Arizona and was fluent in English.</p> <p>The Periodic Review Board said in a short statement that Mr. al-Sharbi had unspecified "physical and mental health issues," and that, with rehabilitation and security measures, including travel restrictions, he could be safely transferred to the custody of another country.</p> <p>The board released the decision less than a week after disclosing that it had approved the repatriation of Mohammed al-Qahtani, a mentally ill Saudi prisoner who was considered to be Al Qaeda's intended 20th hijacker in the Sept. 11 attacks.</p>

Last Friday, according to people familiar with the process, the Pentagon notified Congress that Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III had signed off on Saudi guarantees for security arrangements upon Mr. Qahtani's return. The certification is required by law at least 30 days before transfer.

The initial reaction to the decision was muted. Then on Monday, the top Republican on the House Armed Services Committee, Representative Mike D. Rogers of Alabama, responded to published reports about plans to transfer Mr. Qahtani by accusing the Biden administration of "[an appalling capitulation to the far left](#)."

Mr. al-Sharbi, a citizen of Saudi Arabia, may be able to go home sooner than [other cleared detainees](#) whose governments are considered too unstable or too untrustworthy to make satisfactory agreements with the United States.

Saudi Arabia has received about 140 Saudis and Yemenis from Guantánamo into a program created to help rehabilitate men who joined militant, jihadist movements in Afghanistan in the years before the Sept. 11 attacks.

But the board did not specifically recommend that Mr. al-Sharbi be sent to Saudi Arabia. Instead it called for the receiving country to monitor his activities, prevent him from traveling and continue to share information about him with U.S. authorities.

The case of Mr. al-Sharbi illustrated the challenges to successive U.S. administrations of putting suspected Qaeda foot soldiers on trial at Guantánamo.

For a time, he was charged with "providing material support for terrorism" for allegedly helping to build car-bomb detonators in the Punjab region of Pakistan that were to be shipped to Afghanistan. He was captured in March 2002 with a "high-value detainee" known as Abu Zubaydah in a raid in Faisalabad, Pakistan.

But higher courts ruled that the charge of providing material support [was not constitutional at the military commissions](#), making him and other low-value prisoners essentially ineligible for trial. He spent years as an indefinite detainee.

In his first years at Guantánamo Bay, Mr. al-Sharbi was considered [a belligerent, unrepentant prisoner](#). At a hearing in 2004 or 2005 before a military board, which reviewed his status as an "enemy combatant," he railed against capitalism, America, homosexuality, Israel and the war in Iraq.

In 2006, he was more soft-spoken but rejected the authority of the war court to put him on trial. He rebuffed his U.S. military defense lawyer in fluent English and derided the proceedings altogether as "same circus, different clown."

Mr. al-Sharbi apparently mellowed in recent years. An unidentified U.S. military officer who represented him at a board hearing in December said they had "many discussions" about how he would manage after Guantánamo. The U.S. officer said Mr. al-Sharbi "could assimilate well in either an Arabic- or English-speaking country."

Sabrina P. Shroff, a federal public defender who has represented Mr. al-Sharbi in an unlawful detention case in U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., for about a year, wrote to the board that he did not pose a threat to the national security of the United States. Ms. Shroff also said that she was "so confident of his goodness" that she would "welcome him in my home," and gave him her New York City address.

That is not currently possible because former Guantánamo detainees are forbidden to enter the United States.

	<p>“He has no animus,” Ms. Shroff wrote. “Ghassan has frequently said that he has to look forward and the best way to look forward is with clear eyes, and an open and pure heart.”</p>
Return to Top	
HEADLINE	02/11 US moves to seize \$7B Afghanistan funds
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/11/us/politics/taliban-afghanistan-911-families-frozen-funds.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=US%20Politics
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — President Biden will start to clear a legal path for certain relatives of victims of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks to pursue \$3.5 billion from assets that Afghanistan’s central bank had deposited in New York before the Taliban takeover, according to officials familiar with internal deliberations.</p> <p>At the same time, Mr. Biden will issue an executive order invoking emergency powers to consolidate and freeze all \$7 billion of the total assets the Afghan central bank kept in New York and ask a judge for permission to move the other \$3.5 billion to a trust fund to pay for immediate humanitarian relief efforts in Afghanistan, the officials said.</p> <p>The highly unusual set of moves, expected to be announced on Friday, is meant to address a tangled knot of legal, political, foreign policy and humanitarian problems stemming from the attacks and the end of the 20-year war in Afghanistan.</p> <p>When the Afghan government dissolved in August — with top officials, including its president and the acting governor of its central bank, fleeing the country — it left behind slightly more than \$7 billion in central bank assets on deposit at the Federal Reserve Bank in New York. Because it was no longer clear who — if anyone — had legal authority to gain access to that account, the Fed made the funds unavailable for withdrawal.</p> <p>The Taliban, now in control of Afghanistan, immediately claimed a right to the money. But a group of relatives of victims of the Sept. 11 attacks, one of several sets who had won default judgments against the group in once seemingly quixotic lawsuits years ago, sought to seize it to pay off that debt.</p> <p>Meanwhile, the economy in Afghanistan has been collapsing, leading to a mass starvation that is in turn creating an enormous and destabilizing new wave of refugees — and raising a clear need for extensive spending on humanitarian relief.</p> <p>Against that backdrop, the White House’s National Security Council led months of deliberations on the central bank funds involving top officials from departments including Justice, State and Treasury, according to people who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss a sensitive matter that has not yet been made public.</p> <p>The money belonging to the Afghan central bank — known as Da Afghanistan Bank — includes assets like currency, bonds and gold.</p> <p>Much of it came from foreign exchange funds that accumulated over the past 20 years — a time when the United States and other Western countries were donating large sums to Afghanistan, helping generate that activity. Alex Zerden, a former top Treasury Department official in Afghanistan, characterized the central bank reserves as a kind of rainy day fund for the Afghan people.</p> <p>In addition, about half a billion dollars of the bank’s assets correspond to the reserves of commercial banks in Afghanistan, which by law must keep a certain amount of their deposits — including the savings of ordinary Afghan people — at the central bank. Those assets are owned by Da Afghanistan Bank, but it owes the same amount to the commercial banks.</p> <p>After the Taliban took over Afghanistan, they appointed their own official to lead the central bank and demanded the immediate release of the money held in New York. But under longstanding counterterrorism sanctions imposed by the United States, it is illegal to engage in financial transactions with them.</p>

Another option has been to let the assets sit untouched, gathering interest for what is likely to be years before the Taliban perhaps again lose power and a more normal government arises.

But in September, a group of about 150 relatives of Sept. 11 victims, who years ago won a default judgment after suing targets like Al Qaeda and Taliban in a case known as Havlish, persuaded a judge to dispatch a United States Marshal to [serve the legal department of the Federal Reserve of New York with a “writ of execution”](#) to seize the money.

After The New York Times [reported on the matter](#) in November, a number of other Sept. 11 groups who filed similar lawsuits after the attacks stepped forward to [ask for a share of the Afghan bank assets](#).

By then, the Biden administration had intervened in the Havlish litigation, invoking a law that permits it to step into lawsuits to inform the court what is in the national interest. It has postponed the deadline for it to make that statement until Friday.

Mr. Biden has now decided that the government will not object to any court decision to devote half of the money for the Sept. 11 claims. The Justice Department is instead expected to tell the court that victims of the attacks should have a full opportunity to have their claims heard, according to people familiar with the matter.

But if the judge agrees to partly lift the writ of execution, Mr. Biden will seek to direct the remainder toward a trust fund to be spent on food and other assistance in Afghanistan — while keeping it out of the hands of the Taliban, according to people briefed on the decision. Setting up that fund and working out the details is expected to take several months, the people said.

It is highly unusual for the United States government to commandeer a foreign country’s assets on domestic soil. Officials are said to have discussed a two-part legal process for Mr. Biden to engineer that outcome.

First, he would use emergency powers under [a provision of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act](#) to “direct and compel” that a foreign country’s assets in the United States be moved to a segregated account. That would block them, but the Afghanistan central bank would still own them.

Second, officials have discussed then using [a provision of the Federal Reserve Act](#) that permits disposing of property belonging to the central bank of a foreign nation — so long as it has the blessing of someone the secretary of state has recognized as being “the accredited representative” of that foreign country.

But deciding who qualifies as such a person, at a time when Afghanistan’s former government no longer exists, has raised significant complications. It remained unclear what solution Biden administration officials had settled on and whether the name of any person or people they deem as such would be disclosed for security reasons, like possibly endangering family members still in Afghanistan.

Further complicating matters, the United States does not recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, raising the question of whether funds belonging to the Afghan central bank are really the Taliban’s and so can be used to pay off the Taliban’s judgment debts.

But the Biden administration has come under domestic political pressure to tell the court that it thinks the bank’s money is sufficiently linked to the Taliban now that they control that country and its institutions, making the funds seizable.

Lawyers in the Havlish case had earlier proposed a similar arrangement, dividing the assets between humanitarian relief and paying off the Taliban’s judgment debt to their clients. In a statement relayed this week by his legal team, a plaintiff in that case, Ramon Melendez Sr., argued that using the money that way would be just.

“I lost my wife on 9/11 due to the Taliban’s support for terrorism,” Mr. Melendez said. “I became a single parent to my two sons and then lost my house. I have never received any money against my judgment. I think some money should go to humanitarian relief for the Afghan people but I also want my legal judgment to be fully honored.”

But not all relatives of the Sept. 11 victims agree. This week, Barry Amundson, whose brother Craig was killed in the Pentagon that day, said his group — September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows — thought all of the money should go to benefit Afghans.

“I can’t think of a worse betrayal of the people of Afghanistan than to freeze their assets and give it to 9/11 families,” Mr. Amundson said. “While 9/11 families are seeking justice for their loss through these suits, I fear that the end result of seizing this money will be to cause further harm to innocent Afghans who have already suffered greatly.”

The administration’s move will further cripple Afghanistan’s already paralyzed central bank; draining most of the bank’s capital — it also has about \$2 billion scattered across Germany, Switzerland, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar — makes it even less likely that the bank will be able to resume its efforts to stabilize the value of Afghan currency and prices in that country, including by regularly auctioning millions of U.S. dollars for Afghan cash.

In recent weeks, a longtime member of the bank’s board, Dr. Shah Mohammad Mehrabi, had argued that the U.S. government should instead let Da Afghanistan Bank try to restart some of that work and carefully watch to make sure the funds did not reach the Taliban.

In an interview, Dr. Mehrabi — who is also an economics professor at Montgomery College in Maryland — contended that the central bank should be seen as independent of the now Taliban-led Afghan government. He said that many civil servants there knew how to run the bank, and that depriving the bank of the funds it needed to maintain price stability would lead to runs on commercial banks, mass defaulting on loans and ultimately broader disaster.

“You’re talking about moving toward a total collapse of the banking system,” he said. “I think it’s a shortsighted view.”

But an administration official familiar with the government deliberations argued that the “sad reality” was that even if the central bank regained access to the assets in New York and moved them all into Afghanistan for one last injection of capital, it would not solve the deeper structural problems that have sent the country’s economy spiraling into ruin.

For two decades, Afghanistan’s economy was drastically and artificially bolstered by enormous influxes of foreign aid and security assistance from the West, as the United States and its NATO allies pumped money into a nation-building effort.

But that spigot abruptly closed after the Taliban takeover in August, with devastating economic consequences. Among others, hundreds of thousands of Afghans whose salaries were paid by the former government are now unemployed, their incomes vanished.

A shortage of physical currency has led to restrictions on how much the minority of Afghans who have bank accounts may withdraw from their savings. Making more available, specialists say, is likely to accelerate capital flight: As confidence in the country’s future dims, more Afghans are moving their assets abroad.

Some remittances and other international financial transfers have slowed, along with previously planned imports of goods and services, because of fears of violating sanctions on the Taliban.

Against that backdrop, the value of the Afghan currency has plummeted, and with it, the ability of millions of people who were already living on the edge to buy enough food to eat.

As the situation has rapidly grown dire, the Treasury Department has moved to make some exemptions to the sanctions, including telling the money transfer company MoneyGram that it can transmit money to Afghanistan so long as the money will not benefit anyone on [a list of people individually penalized as terrorists](#).

In January, the United States [ramped up total American aid to the country by \\$308 million](#), bringing its assistance there to \$516 million since August.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Informants tip, spy drone led to ISIS leader
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/us/politics/abu-ibrahim-al-hashimi-al-qurayshi-isis.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — A vital clue in the two-year manhunt for the Islamic State’s elusive leader fell into place last fall when a U.S. spy drone spotted a bearded man bathing atop a three-story building in northwest Syria. The man was missing his right leg.</p> <p>That physical disability matched the description of the man American and allied spies had been searching for: Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, the leader of ISIS.</p> <p>Intelligence analysts soon trained other aerial surveillance cameras and eavesdropping sensors on the rooftop and surrounding areas. Within weeks, American officials said, what started as a tip from informants on the ground had been confirmed by the sensors in the sky. That information, reported earlier by The Washington Post, set in motion a daring U.S. commando raid that led to Mr. al-Qurayshi’s death last week.</p> <p>Mr. al-Qurayshi, who was 45 and born in Iraq, had lost his leg in an American airstrike near Mosul, Iraq, in 2015, senior American officials said. “We took a shot at him in 2015,” one senior official said. “He was on our target list from the earliest days of the campaign.”</p> <p>The blast that killed Mr. al-Qurayshi during the raid was most likely caused by a large bomb the terrorist rigged to destroy most of his third-floor residence, senior U.S. military officials said on Thursday.</p> <p>The explosion was so powerful that military officials now suspect that a child found dead on the building’s second floor was killed by the blast’s concussive force, not in a firefight between the child’s parents and the commandos. The child had no visible injuries from gunshots or falling debris, the officials said.</p> <p>The Pentagon has acknowledged seven deaths — four civilians and three Islamic State fighters — in the raid to capture or kill Mr. al-Qurayshi. But the military officials acknowledged on Thursday that more bodies might have been recovered from the rubble after the commandos had left the scene. Rescue workers have said women and children were among at least 13 killed during the assault.</p> <p>New details about the predawn assault are emerging a week after President Biden said he had ordered commandos to seize the ISIS leader, rather than bomb the entire three-story building, to minimize the risks to civilians. Pentagon officials have said that 10 people, including eight children, were safely evacuated. Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III said the military would review whether the mission had harmed civilians.</p> <p>The two-hour raid in the town of Atmeh near the Turkish border came days after the end of the largest U.S. combat involvement with the Islamic State since the jihadists’ so-called caliphate fell three years ago. American forces backed a Kurdish-led militia in northeastern Syria as it fought for more than a week to oust Islamic State fighters from a prison they had occupied in the city of Hasaka.</p> <p>The battle for the prison killed hundreds of people and offered a bleak reminder that even after the collapse of the caliphate, and now the death of Mr. al-Qurayshi, the group’s ability to sow chaotic violence persists. Indeed, a United Nations counterterrorism report issued this week estimated that the Islamic State still</p>

retains 6,000 to 10,000 fighters across Iraq and Syria, “where it is forming cells and training operatives to launch attacks.”

Also this week, the State Department offered a reward of up to \$10 million for information leading to the identification or location of Sanaullah Ghafari, the leader of Islamic State Khorasan, or ISIS-K, the group’s branch in Afghanistan. The terrorist group claimed responsibility for an attack at Kabul’s international airport on Aug. 26 that killed 13 U.S. service members and as many as 170 civilians during the American-led evacuation.

On Thursday, two senior U.S. military officials described the planning and execution of the raid to a small group of reporters on a teleconference. They spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss operational matters.

The mission, led by Delta Force commandos, was set in motion last September with a tip that the ISIS leader was hiding out on the top floor of a house in northwestern Syria. Overseen by the military’s Central Command, the commandos rehearsed dozens of times, and Mr. Biden was briefed on an exercise involving a tabletop model of the building. The troops also practiced using a mock-up of the building that they would eventually raid.

By late December, the commandos were ready and Mr. Biden approved the mission. But bad weather in northwestern Syria and a desire to carry out the mission on a moonless night pushed the operation to Feb. 2.

The American assault in Atmeh, backed by Apache helicopter gunships, armed MQ-9 Reaper drones and attack jets, resembled the raid in October 2019 in which Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the previous leader of the Islamic State, died when he detonated a suicide vest as U.S. forces raided a hide-out not far from where last week’s operation took place.

U.S. helicopters were launched from a base in northeastern Syria controlled by the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, and made several refueling stops during the 800-mile nighttime mission across the country. American officials alerted Israel, Turkey and Russia, which has troops based in northwestern Syria, shortly before the mission was underway to avoid any accidental contact, the officials said.

American officials have previously said Mr. al-Qurayshi, also known as Hajji Abdullah, lived with his wife and two children on the building’s third floor. He left the building only occasionally to bathe on the rooftop. He relied on a top lieutenant who lived on the building’s second floor and who, along with a network of couriers, carried out his orders to ISIS branches in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere in the world. A Syrian family with no apparent connection to the terrorist group was living on the first floor.

Shortly after the commandos arrived just after midnight, warnings shouted in Arabic over bullhorns urged occupants on the first floor — as well as anyone else — to evacuate. A man, a woman and four children fled the first floor.

At almost the same time, a huge explosion — much bigger than a suicide vest with 5 to 10 pounds of explosive, officials said on Thursday — ripped through the third floor. The blast was so powerful that bodies, including Mr. al-Qurayshi’s, were blown out the window.

Mr. Biden said last week that Mr. al-Qurayshi died when the terrorist exploded a bomb that killed him as well as members of his family. Military officials said on Thursday that they had no proof that Mr. al-Qurayshi detonated the bomb but thought so, given his position. The officials emphasized that the U.S. commandos did not attack the third floor or detonate any explosives, and caused none of the casualties.

After the blast, commandos stormed the building and engaged in a firefight with Mr. al-Qurayshi’s lieutenant and his wife, who were barricaded on the second floor with their children. Both died, as did one child, but four children were safely evacuated, U.S. officials said.

A 13-year-old boy who was among those evacuated from the first floor described his family's terror at being taken from their home in the middle of the night.

The commandos had thrown his father to the ground and kicked him before picking him up and searching his body for weapons, the boy said, giving only his first name, Muhammad, for fear of retribution.

"I felt like I had reached my death and that there was no escape," he told a reporter for The New York Times two days after the raid. "I figured when I saw them throw my father to the ground that they were going to kill him, to shoot him."

His mother fled the house later and the commandos had torn off her head scarf and dragged her by her hair, he said.

After the operation, the Americans questioned the family about their upstairs neighbors and they replied that they had not known them well, he said.

Before the Americans left, they told the family, "We, here, killed the leader of ISIS," the boy said.

The four children who were evacuated from the house after their parents were killed in the firefight on the second floor included two boys — a baby and a 2-year-old — and two girls, 3 and 12, he said.

The commandos left them with his family, the boy said, and they were taken the next morning by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, an Islamist group formerly linked to Al Qaeda that controls the area.

The group has not said where it took the children.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/11 Extremist attacks in northern Benin kill 8
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/attacks-north-benin-park-kill-including-french-citizen-82820969
GIST	<p>COTONOU, Benin -- Attacks by suspected Islamic extremists in northern Benin have killed at least eight people, including army soldiers, park rangers and a French instructor, the government has confirmed.</p> <p>Six people were killed and a dozen injured in an ambush Tuesday which included explosions from improvised land mines on a patrol of park rangers in the north of the W National Park near the borders of neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger, Benin government spokesman Wilfried Leandre Hounbedji said.</p> <p>Five rangers and their French instructor were killed in that attack, he said.</p> <p>The rangers were part of an anti-poaching patrol working with African Parks, an international organization that manages several parks on the continent including the W National Park. The W park is shaped like the letter in the alphabet as it follows the bends in the Niger River as it straddles Benin, Niger and Burkina Faso.</p> <p>Reinforcements from the Benin Armed Forces have been deployed to the area and African Parks is working with the government to secure its staff and the surrounding civilian communities, the spokesman said.</p> <p>No group has claimed responsibility for the attack but Islamic extremist groups with links to al-Qaida and the Islamic State group have spread violence across West Africa, including to coastal countries, like Benin.</p> <p>The French National Anti-Terrorism Prosecutor's office says it has opened an investigation into the killings, adding that the French instructor involved was 50 years old.</p>

	<p>A second attack occurred on Thursday in which a parks patrol hit an improvised landmine and then was assaulted. A civilian and a parks agent died in that incident, he said.</p> <p>There have been multiple attacks against Benin's armed forces since December, according to an internal security report seen by The Associated Press. In December two Benin soldiers were killed by jihadis near the border with Burkina Faso.</p> <p>The government has warned that security is critical because of the presence of extremists near an area called the "triple point" where the park borders all three countries.</p> <p>The latest attacks in Benin raise concerns about the potential spread of militant violence spilling over from the Sahel region," said Laith Alkhouri, CEO of Intelonyx Intelligence Advisory. "The risk would be a potential security crisis, particularly in the north of the country, which would overwhelm the security apparatus there, something that should be prevented early on."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/11 Afghan Taliban: explosion near mosque
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/afghan-taliban-explosion-mosque-kills-wounds-82821703
GIST	<p>KABUL, Afghanistan -- An explosion on the doorsteps of a mosque in northern Afghanistan killed one worshipper and wounded seven others on Friday, a Taliban official said.</p> <p>Baz Mohammad Sarwari of Badghis province said the cause of the explosion is unknown but investigations are ongoing.</p> <p>No one immediately claimed responsibility for the explosion. The local Islamic State affiliate has in the past repeatedly claimed responsibility for similar attacks.</p> <p>Sarwari said the wounded were transferred to the provincial hospital while Taliban troops secured the area.</p> <p>The explosion went off while dozens of worshippers had gathered inside the mosque for Friday prayers.</p>
Return to Top	

Suspicious, Unusual

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	02/11 Wave off Vancouver 'once-in-millennium'
SOURCE	https://www.foxnews.com/science/wave-vancouver-island-2020-was-once-millennium-event-scientists
GIST	<p>A "once-in-a-millennium" wave that broke off the coast of Vancouver, British Columbia, in November 2020 is now considered to be the most "extreme" rogue wave ever recorded, Canadian scientists have found.</p> <p>A rogue wave is considered to be more than twice the height of other waves breaking around the same time.</p> <p>The wave, detected off the tiny town of Ucluelet with a sensor buoy, was recorded at 17.6 meters tall or 57.7 feet while other swells around the same time were only 6 meters or 19.6 feet tall, making it three times higher, CTV News reported.</p> <p>"Only a few rogue waves in high sea states have been observed directly, and nothing of this magnitude," University of Victoria scientist Johannes Gemmrich, who co-led the research with Leah Cicon, said. "The probability of such an event occurring is once in 1,300 years."</p> <p>The research by the University of Victoria scientists was first published in the academic journal Scientific Reports last week.</p>

	<p>"Proportionally, the Ucluelet wave is likely the most extreme rogue wave ever recorded," he added.</p> <p>Rogue waves are also sometimes called "freak" or "killer" waves and can be extremely dangerous because of their "unpredictability" and "sheer power," MarineLabs CEO Scott Beatty said.</p> <p>The first rogue wave ever recorded was off the coast of Norway in 1995. Known as the "Draupner wave," it was about 83.9 feet tall while other waves surrounding it were closer to 39 feet tall.</p> <p>He said, "The potential of predicting rogue waves remains an open question, but our data is helping to better understand when, where and how rogue waves form, and the risks that they pose."</p> <p>"Capturing this once-in-a-millennium wave, right in our backyard, is a thrilling indicator of the power of coastal intelligence to transform marine safety," Beatty told CTV.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Lack of natural snow at Winter Olympics
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2022/02/10/olympics-weather-snow-climate-beijing/
GIST	<p>Even cold-hardy competitors have been shivering this month as they dart down the slopes of Yanqing and Zhangjiakou, the mountainous sites just west of Beijing that are serving as outdoor venues for the Winter Olympics.</p> <p>While there has been plenty of cold air, snowfall has been hard to come by.</p> <p>“Where can you go to get minus 15 [Celsius, or 5°F] and sun and no snow coming for a week?” Norwegian Alpine skier Kjetil Jansrud told NPR, referring to the Yanqing course.</p> <p>The juxtaposition has left some observers puzzled. How could such a frigid venue be forced to rely almost completely on artificial snow?</p> <p>Snow-making has become routine for the Winter Olympics, as the demand for a reliable snow scape at an ever-more-lucrative global event has increased side by side with the uncertainties of human-caused global warming.</p> <p>At this year’s winter games, however, the lack of natural snow is not a shocker or even necessarily a byproduct of climate change.</p> <p>“I’m not the least bit surprised at the weather they’re having in Beijing. It’s pretty much par for the course in that part of the world,” said Jim Steenburgh, a snow expert and professor of meteorology at the University of Utah.</p> <p>Steenburgh, a consultant on Winter Olympics weather for more than 20 years, visited the Beijing area venues in 2018, where he assisted with planning and giving lectures on snow forecasting.</p> <p>“They told us that it barely snows there,” Steenburgh said.</p> <p>Blame it on the monsoon</p> <p>What limits snowfall in Yanqing and Zhangjiakou is the same mammoth atmospheric cycle that affects more than 2 billion people each year: the East Asian Monsoon.</p> <p>At its heart, the monsoon is an annual seesaw — one that for millions of years has pushed cold, dry air southward across eastern Asia each winter and funneled warm, moist air northward each summer.</p> <p>The monsoon-related flow contributes to the largest and most intense zones of high pressure on the planet, sourced from Siberia. These domes of frigid, sinking air typically block Pacific moisture from reaching</p>

northeast China during the winter. As a result, 2 percent of Beijing's annual average precipitation — [a mere 0.40 inches](#) — falls between December and February. Nearly all of that is in the form of snow.

Compare that with Washington, D.C., where winter brings 22 percent of the city's annual average precipitation — or [about 8.89 inches](#). Most of that comes in the form of rain, but a single top-end D.C. snowstorm can produce more snow than Beijing typically gets in an entire winter.

Although the mountains near Beijing are not an obvious choice for the Winter Olympics in terms of snowfall, they are among the most reliable of recent venues when it comes to cold weather. Even in the second week of February, as Beijing rose well above 40 degrees, temperatures at the higher elevations of Yanqing and Zhangjiakou stayed lower.

Another blast of Siberian cold is expected to sweep across northeast China during the final week of competition.

The [cold surge](#) may push temperatures 10 to 15 degrees below average, and light snow is possible this weekend.

The jet stream is ushering weather systems through northeast China quickly, helping to keep the air well-mixed. Together with [strong emission control measures](#), the weather pattern has cut back on the risk of severe air pollution during the winter games.

Adapting to less-than-ideal winter weather

A lack of natural snow has become a common theme in recent Winter Olympics.

The 2018 winter games were held in and around PyeongChang, in the northeast part of South Korea. Located well east of China, on a peninsula between the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan, the PyeongChang area would seem to be a more natural spot for reliable infusions of [Siberian cold](#) paired with access to enough Pacific moisture for ample snowfall.

Even so, the PyeongChang venues made [extensive use](#) of artificial snow.

Other recent Winter Olympics have flirted more dangerously with the constraints of a warming world. Record-warm weather swaddled the Vancouver, British Columbia, area for the 2010 games; some spectators were [drenched by heavy rain](#).

Conditions in and near Sochi, Russia, were [similarly unwintry](#) during the 2014 winter games, when for the first time a host city failed to dip below freezing during the entire period of competition.

Both these venues can get their share of bountiful snow. However, they are also both naturally prone to warm intrusions, even before taking the effects of climate change into account.

Knowing the weather and climate risks around them, organizers have been pushing beyond mere snow-making into other backstop measures. [Truckloads of snow](#) were brought into the Vancouver venues, and snow from the prior winter was [stored under tarps](#) in the Sochi area.

Snow-making was a novelty during its first major Winter Olympics use, at the 1980 games in Lake Placid, N.Y. Now, with far higher expectations for workable courses, artificial snow is a de facto requirement, Steenburgh said: "They're not going to give an Olympic bid to [a venue] that doesn't have snow-making along every course that needs it."

Although the process of snow-making is replete with multiple, well-catalogued environmental hazards — including noise, pollution and the depleting of local water supplies — the end product can be [surprisingly workable](#) for Alpine racing, where a smooth, manufactured surface from water-injected artificial snow can enhance performance.

“Most of the time, racers want to be on a firm, hard, consistent surface that doesn’t break down when they’re going down a hill,” Steenburgh noted. Referring to World Cup Alpine skiers, he [tweeted](#): “Your worst nightmare is their dream ski surface.”

Cross-country skiers, on the other hand, have voiced concerns about artificial snow on Nordic courses better suited for a natural base.

“I’ve noticed at the World Cup when it is man-made snow, it is scary because instead of sliding on snow you’re sliding on ice,” 2020-21 World Cup winner and Beijing bronze medalist Jessie Diggins [told the Associated Press](#). “I think we’re seeing a higher percentage of falls. I feel it is a little more dangerous now.”

A study [published in January](#), led by Daniel Scott of the University of Waterloo, includes a survey of more than 300 Olympic athletes and coaches from 20 countries on their views of weather-climate conditions, performance and safety. “The athletes and coaches ... were almost unanimous (94%) in their fear that climate change will adversely impact the future development of their sport,” the study found.

One slalom athlete cited the risks of too-warm weather: “body is too hot - difficult to build tension, tiredness - higher risk of injury ... equipment (impacted) in general, but mainly boots get too soft - no proper control over the skis - dangerous!”

Warning: A slippery climate ahead

Venue selection will become an increasing challenge for Winter Olympics planners, according to “[Slippery Slopes: How Climate Change is threatening the Winter Olympics](#).” The report, issued in January, was produced by the [Sport Ecology Group](#) at Loughborough University and the advocacy group [Protect Our Winters](#).

The report cites a [2014 study](#) led by Scott that found that under a high-end emissions scenario (RCP 8.5), six of the 19 venues that have hosted Winter Olympics since 1921 would be cold enough to provide reliable course conditions when paired with advanced snow-making. Even in a low-emissions scenario (RCP 2.6), 13 of the 19 venues would prove reliable.

All of these sites were judged as reliable for the period 1981-2010.

Apart from the Games themselves, a broader threat is facing Olympic competitors as well as everyday winter-sport lovers: a narrower window, both in time and space, for naturally optimal conditions. A warming climate is liable to cut into the places and times where Olympians can put in the practice they need.

“Slippery Slopes” also points out that even the hyper-sculpted racing surface made possible by artificial snow-making has its down side: “Artificial snow fashions a harder surface, creating a risk of more severe injuries when falls do occur.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Diplomats: ‘Havana Syndrome’ hurt morale
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/10/havana-syndrome-cuba-us-diplomats-afsa
GIST	<p>The spread of Havana syndrome has “dramatically hurt” morale in the US diplomatic corps and affected recruitment, according to the head of the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA).</p> <p>Eric Rubin, whose association represents nearly 17,000 current and former diplomats and foreign aid workers, said it was getting harder to find young people to work abroad, because of concerns about Havana syndrome – and about whether the government would look after them if they got sick.</p> <p>A group of cases could not be explained by health or environmental factors, or by psychosomatic illness, researchers found.</p>

“People have suffered real trauma and real injury, and it has dramatically hurt our morale, our readiness, our ability to recruit new members in the foreign service,” Rubin told the first medical symposium on the syndrome since it began affecting US diplomats and intelligence officers in 2016, organised by the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center.

The cause of the syndrome, which involves long-term loss of balance and cognitive function, remains a mystery. A report by a US intelligence panel of experts last week found that pulsed electromagnetic energy and ultrasound were plausible causes in at least some cases.

A CIA assessment made public last month however determined that the majority of the thousand possible cases reported were most likely not the result of a global campaign by a foreign power, while in some two dozen incidents the cause could not be explained.

Rubin did not speculate over the cause, but said that the syndrome was having a potentially serious effect on US diplomacy.

“It is getting harder when we recruit people,” the AFSA president said. “I’ve had young members of the cohort that’s coming into the foreign service ask me: ‘If I do this, what am I getting into? And is this going to get worse? Is this going to get solved? If I get attacked and if I get injured, who’s gonna be there for me?’

“We’ve got to address that,” Rubin said.

Rubin said that care was improving for US officials who have been affected, but that the AFSA was still encountering bureaucratic resistance.

“We pushed really hard,” he said. “We did succeed, but it’s still case-by-case.”

Kenneth Dekleva, a former state department medical officer and psychiatrist who is leading an effort at UT Southwestern to coordinate research on Havana syndrome, said that psychogenic explanations for the spread of the symptoms were not convincing.

“Most diplomats – I would say 99% – want to be overseas, they want to serve their country with dignity and honor, and they want to be healthy,” Dekleva told the Guardian. “They don’t want to assume a patient role. And there’s no gain from it. The burden of illness and suffering is very real for the people. And I find that compelling.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/11 Australia: koalas an endangered species
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/11/world/australia/koala-endangered-species.html
GIST	<p>SYDNEY, Australia — The Australian government on Friday declared the koala an endangered species, as drought, bush fires, disease and habitat loss have drastically reduced the numbers of an animal that is an emblem of the country’s unique wildlife.</p> <p>The announcement, by the country’s environment minister, came two years after a parliamentary inquiry predicted that koalas could be extinct by 2050 without urgent government intervention.</p> <p>Reclassification from vulnerable to endangered does not require the Australian government to take any special action. But it separately announced that it would adopt a recovery plan for the koala issued by the country’s environmental department.</p> <p>That plan would aid the creation of laws protecting koalas and their natural woodland habitats. Additionally, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced last month that the government would commit 50 million Australian dollars (\$35.7 million) over four years to koala recovery and conservation efforts.</p>

The plight of the koala gained global attention in 2019 when bush fires raged over millions of acres in Australia, blackening the animal's habitats. A report commissioned by the World Wildlife Fund-Australia estimated that [60,000 koalas](#) had been "killed, injured or affected in some way."

[In response](#), the Australian government committed 18 million Australian dollars (\$12.8 million) to be split between restoring the koala's habitats and investing in koala health research.

In 2020, W.W.F.-Australia, the International Fund for Animal Welfare and the Humane Society International [collectively nominated the animal](#) for listing as an endangered species. The groups found that koala populations in the states of Queensland and New South Wales had decreased by [50 percent](#) or more since 2001.

It's unclear how many koalas remain. Efforts to count the animals, which are continuing, have proven [extremely difficult](#).

While the animal welfare groups welcomed the Australian government's actions announced on Friday, others said that key problems — specifically land clearing, deforestation and resulting habitat loss — had been neglected.

Deborah Tabart, chairwoman of the Australian Koala Foundation, said the animal's new status "doesn't mean anything." The federal government, she added, "may be offering our koalas a nice new word, but behind all the photo opportunities and political rhetoric they continue to approve the destruction of the koala habitat."

"If the clearing of the koala habitat continues," Ms. Tabart said, "a further status change is imminent — from endangered to extinct."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 New WA maximum temperature record: 120
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/tech/science/environment/washington-maximum-temperature-record-120-degrees/281-b6e6d27b-e37e-4a7d-a366-0e16dc572f06
GIST	<p>RICHLAND, Wash. — Eight months after the fact, Washington state officially has a new maximum temperature record: 120 degrees Fahrenheit.</p> <p>The reading was taken by the Department of Energy at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation on June 29, 2021, during a historic heatwave in the Pacific Northwest.</p> <p>The previous record of 118 degrees Fahrenheit was set in Wahluke, Wash., on July 24, 1918.</p> <p>Although the reading was taken over eight months ago, the State Climate Extremes Committee completed an investigation before accepting the record-breaking temperature observations taken that day.</p> <p>There were over two dozen readings taken on June 29, 2021 that registered temperatures that matched or exceeded the previous maximum temperature record for Washington state. However, the SCEC deemed many of the reports "unsuitable for further consideration" for a myriad of reasons.</p> <p>Some instruments were used for purposes other than meteorological accuracy and some were taken by commercial or privately owned networks, which likely did not match up to SCEC standards, according to a report.</p> <p>Nearly a dozen readings taken by the Washington State Department of Ecology that registered above the 118-degree record -- with some going as high as 134 degrees -- were dismissed. The report said the instruments used were intended to monitor environmental quality and were located above metal instrument housing causing the readings to come out too extreme to be considered valid.</p>

Return to Top	<p>The committee cross-referenced the remaining temperature readings with infrared imagery from several polar-orbiting satellites to confirm the readings were taken in the same areas where the hottest surface temperatures were observed, according to the report.</p> <p>One image clearly showed the hottest temperatures in Washington occurred in the area of the Hanford Nuclear Reservation.</p> <p>Temperature readings around the reservation area and readings taken by Washington State Department of Transportation instruments within the reservation recorded similar temperatures around 118 and 119 degrees Fahrenheit.</p> <p>The previous maximum temperature record for Washington was set on July 24, 1918, at a National Weather Service Cooperative station in Grant County along the Columbia River, according to the report. The record was matched at the Ice Harbor Dam on Aug. 5, 1961. Before that, the maximum temperature record of 115 degrees Fahrenheit was taken in Kennewick in 1898.</p>
-------------------------------	--

HEADLINE	02/10 Bellevue passes Manhattan housing prices
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/its-prosperity-bomb-2-0-bellevue-passes-manhattan-in-housing-prices/
GIST	<p>For years Seattle has been in a high state of angst, or yearning in some cases, about the prospect that our fishing village was morphing into the new Manhattan.</p> <p>We had it all wrong. It turns out once-sleepy Bellevue was sprinting there first.</p> <p>You’ve probably been rubbernecking, as I have, at these insane stories about bidding wars for Eastside real estate. This week a Seattle Times colleague noted one house in Bellevue got 14 bids and sold for \$1 million more than the asking price.</p> <p>Local agent Matt Miner relayed that last year he lost out on a \$900,000 house in Bellevue because there were 56 other offers. He expects that dizzying pace to slow later this year — but Bellevue now has its own definition of slow.</p> <p>“By ‘slow,’ we mean instead of every house getting 35 offers like they did in 2021, every house might get like five to 10 offers,” Miner wrote in a 2022 forecast.</p> <p>Bellevue prices shot up a ridiculous 28% year-over-year, reaching a median price of \$1.37 million for all sales of homes and condos in December, according to real estate tracker Redfin. That’s nearly double that of Seattle.</p> <p>All this frothiness has led to a watershed moment: Tech-fueled Bellevue has now passed the borough of Manhattan in housing prices. Redfin reports that Manhattan’s median price is depressed a bit from its pre-pandemic highs, and is now \$100,000 less than Bellevue’s at \$1.25 million.</p> <p>It’s incredible — especially if you’re old enough to remember, as I am, the days when Bellevue’s largest employer was a mall.</p> <p>It’s all grown up now and going bonkers. Of cities with more than 100,000 population, Bellevue (pop. 152,000) is now more expensive than all of them save for San Francisco and a bunch of Silicon Valley tech towns like Sunnyvale (\$1.67 million), San Mateo (\$1.46 million), Santa Clara (\$1.44 million) and so on.</p> <p>It wouldn’t be shocking if Bellevue passes San Francisco this spring, as prices down there have been floating around \$1.5 million for a few years.</p>

Buying in Bellevue definitely gets you more square footage for the buck than in Manhattan. The mix is tilted far more heavily to single-family homes. But some of what's going on across Lake Washington right now sounds more like Park Avenue than [Old Bellevue](#).

For example, a one-bedroom condo of just 850 square feet [sold there last week for \\$1.35 million](#).

Right now, there's an apartment [for rent in Bellevue for \\$20,625 per month](#). That's nearly \$700 a night (it's a downtown penthouse, but still — you could just bunk permanently at the Four Seasons hotel for about that price).

Recently a classic Old Bellevue home — a 1957 “fixer opportunity” in the Somerset neighborhood, dated and with a carport — went on the market for \$1.5 million. It [sold for \\$2.4 million](#), 60% over the asking price.

It's not just purchase prices soaring — Bellevue's average rent is [more than \\$2,500](#) for a one bedroom, according to rent tracker Apartment List. That's still less than both Manhattan and San Francisco but about \$200 a month pricier than Seattle.

Local agents suggest it's the early tremors of “Prosperity Bomb 2.0” — my words not theirs — due to the pending arrival of a certain tech goliath.

“The plans to add 25,000+ Amazon employees in Bellevue over the coming few years has already exerted an impact on the local real estate market,” [writes Jason Foss](#), a downtown Bellevue-based agent. “Whether it's investors looking to capitalize on that future growth, or just regular folks trying to buy now in fear of being priced out in the future, people are currently making buying decisions because of what Amazon is planning.”

A few years back I [made up the self-contradictory term “prosperity bomb”](#) to try to describe the disparate impacts of tech wealth descending on a town.

The first part, the prosperity, is amazing for a city. The jobs are plentiful and lucrative; the restaurants fantastic; the spillover into arts giving and philanthropy alluring. If you are fortunate enough to already own a home, the wealth blast makes you rich (asset rich, anyway).

But if you are younger or just moved here, say, or a new teacher or on a fixed income, you are at risk of being financially blown right out of town.

“Given that only about 350 condos sell every year in downtown Bellevue, only a very small fraction of the 25,000 new Amazon office workers would need to purchase a condo in order to have a substantial effect on that market,” Foss said.

Take it from Seattle: You can try to meet this moment with capitalism (build, build, build) or with socialism (public housing, rent control). Or maybe a mix of both. But it's an unprecedented challenge. Seattle built [nearly 50,000 housing units in five years](#) and taxed Amazon and yet still is struggling to find the right answers.

I keep seeing Bellevue city leaders and planners saying [they won't make Seattle's mistakes](#). There [won't be so many housing, infrastructure and inequality flash points](#), which in Seattle ultimately led to a political backlash. Bellevue, they say, is ready.

I'm rooting for Bellevue. They've always had their governance act together and somebody's got to finally solve the puzzle of supercharged growth.

Passing Manhattan before the bomb even drops, though? Not a promising start.

HEADLINE	02/09 Real reason not enough truck drivers?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/09/business/truck-driver-shortage.html
GIST	<p>A faint winter sun slides toward the frozen scrub as Stephen Graves guides his tractor-trailer across the cracked pavement of a truck stop parking lot in southern Oklahoma. Exhausted from another 400 miles behind the wheel, he needs the restroom. But mostly he needs an answer to the same question that dogs him nearly every day as darkness falls: Where can he park his rig for the night?</p> <p>Graves is nearing the 11-hour limit on driving before he is legally required to rest for 10 hours. He could push on for another hour, creep closer to the Texas border and shorten the distance to his drop-off the next morning — a warehouse alongside the Dallas-Fort Worth airport.</p> <p>The calculus is tricky. The next truck stop down the interstate is notoriously short on parking. He might get there and have to settle for the shoulder of a highway on-ramp. This stop outside the minuscule town of Springer is unappealing — its bathrooms rank and its dining options minimal. But it has parking in abundance. So he pulls in for the night and climbs into the bunk at the back of his cab for a few hours of fitful sleep.</p> <p>Graves, 65, has been driving a truck for more than two decades. He is prone to rhapsodizing about the open road. But he does not struggle to explain why his industry is perpetually bemoaning a shortage of drivers.</p> <p>“The lifestyle probably is the first thing that smacks people in the face,” he said. “You know what it does to you. You’re thinking about it all the time. We’re tired. Our bodies are starting to go. Our bladders have been put to the test. And no exercise. We end up with all types of heart and other health ailments. You can’t truly fathom what it’s done to you.”</p> <p>In a world contending with the unrelenting impact of the Great Supply Chain Disruption and its attendant worry of the moment, rising consumer prices, a shortage of truck drivers is frequently cited as an explanation for shortages of many other things — from construction supplies to electronics to clothing.</p> <p>Last year, trucking companies in the United States suffered a record deficit of 80,000 drivers, according to the American Trucking Associations, a trade association. Given that trucks move 72% of American freight, a lack of drivers spells substantial disruption.</p> <p>“There’s no silver bullet for fixing this,” said Robert Costello, the trade association’s chief economist. “We need to get more people into the industry.”</p> <p>Some experts counter that the very notion of too few drivers is bogus — a reach by the industry for federal subsidies to train recruits as compensation for its poor rates of retention. The average trucking company has a turnover rate of roughly 95%, meaning that it must replace nearly all of its workforce in the course of a year. More recruits boost the supply of drivers, which keeps a cap on wages.</p> <p>As the trucking association itself noted, more than 10 million Americans held commercial driver’s licenses in 2019. That was nearly triple the 3.7 million trucks that required a driver holding that certification.</p> <p>“This shortage narrative is industry lobbying rhetoric,” said Steve Viscelli, a labor expert at the University of Pennsylvania who previously worked as a truck driver. “There is no shortage of truck drivers. These are just really bad jobs.”</p> <p>Until the 1980s, truck driving was a lucrative pursuit in which one union — the Teamsters — wielded enough power to ensure favorable working conditions, Viscelli recounts in his book “The Big Rig.” But the Carter administration deregulated the industry in the name of fostering competition, clearing the way for an influx of new trucking companies that diminished pay and increased demands on truckers.</p>

The result was an opening for big-box retailers, which harnessed increasingly cheap freight and international trade to stock enormous stores with a vast profusion of wares. Along the way, truck driving was downgraded from a middle-class profession to one best avoided, Viscelli asserts.

Graves is satisfied with his employer, American Central Transport, which has a better retention rate than the average. He has been driving for the company for nearly seven years, and he earns what he describes as “a comfortable living” — enough to finance vacations to Australia, Bulgaria and other far-flung destinations — though he declines to disclose how much.

He and his fellow drivers are now enjoying the upper hand. Trucking fleets are handing out across-the-board raises to retain drivers while offering \$10,000 cash bonuses in a frantic effort to court new hires.

Still, a three-day run in Graves’ vehicle — from Kansas City, Missouri, to Fort Worth and back — reveals the inherent pressures of a relentlessly stressful job.

Here is a life spent navigating the hazards of piloting a truck weighing 26,000 pounds and pulling a 53-foot trailer, while balancing the need to ingest caffeine against the imperative to limit bathroom breaks.

The hours pass, the towns recede, while the gnawing loneliness of the road is constant.

“I don’t pretend that I’m Superman,” Graves said. “I’m a cog in the wheel. If I don’t do what I do, things will slow down. Somebody bought a new TV. They’re waiting for it. They’re going to watch the game.”

The road traveled

Like many truck drivers, Graves had anticipated a different life.

Raised an only child near Richmond, Virginia, he planned to be an engineer. But when his father became ill, he dropped out of college and moved home to help his mother.

He considered training to be a plumber or a carpenter, but those professions entailed years of apprenticing. Driving a truck put him in position to begin earning in a matter of weeks.

Twenty years and 1.6 million miles later, he is still behind the wheel.

At 3:30 on a blustery morning in Kansas City, Graves emerges from his bunk inside his Kenworth T680 tractor and commences his day.

He slips on a Day-Glo orange woolen hat, opens the cabin door and climbs down a ladder to the pavement, grimacing as he lands on his flat feet. The asphalt is pockmarked by patches of ice and crusted snow. In the 12-degree chill, he checks the tire pressure and his brake lines. He checks whether his brake pads or windshield wiper fluid has frozen. He inspects the connection between his tractor and his trailer.

Satisfied, he returns to his cab, fortifies himself with coffee, surveys the paperwork on the load he is picking up this morning and then rolls out of the yard.

Graves is what is known in trucker vernacular as an over-the-road driver, meaning that he typically does not make it home by nightfall. He drives roughly 9,000 miles a month, spending two and three weeks on the road at a time, before returning home to his condo in Kingsport, Tennessee.

This is Day 10 of a 19-day trip that has taken him from Texarkana, Arkansas, to Texarkana, Texas, with three separate runs through Chicago, a stop in Indianapolis and a drop in Spartanburg, South Carolina, before bringing him to Kansas City.

He is headed to a warehouse 35 miles southwest of Kansas City to pick up 26 crates of tractor parts. Then he will begin the 545-mile journey south to a distribution center in Fort Worth.

He keeps his cabin temperature cool, at 63 degrees, to “keep an edge” and stave off “highway hypnosis” — a loss of attention that can be fatal.

Only seven months into his career, he was carrying a load of electronics from North Carolina to Virginia, traveling north on I-95, when a pink Cadillac Escalade traveling southbound hurtled over the divider, flipped in the air and landed in his lane, 150 feet in front of him. He swerved onto the shoulder, but still clipped the vehicle. He was certain that everyone inside was dead. The couple survived. So did his appreciation for the perils of the highway.

“If this isn’t scary, you’re a fool,” he said. “It takes more than the length of a football field to stop out here.”

What he knows viscerally is borne out by statistics. A truck driver is 10 times more likely to be killed on the job than the average American worker, according to federal data.

Every truck stop is like a shrine seeking to ward off the demons of fatigue. Refrigerated display cabinets are stocked with supercaffeinated energy drinks whose brand names attest to the trading of long-term health for a short-term jolt: Red Bull. Java Monster. Bang.

“It’s a deal with the devil,” said Graves, who sticks with coffee.

At the warehouse, his instructions direct him to Building 2, which he assumes means the second building he encounters. But after climbing out of the cab and limping up a staircase, a receptionist directs him back to the first building.

He handles this with studious cheer.

“Good morning, ma’am,” he said to every woman on the other side of the Plexiglas dividers at every warehouse, savoring the most rudimentary human connections. “Are you doing OK?”

He revels in challenging popular stereotypes of the truck driver, speaking with the precise elocution of a college professor. He discarded his CB radio years ago, weary of hearing the crude and sometimes hateful chatter dispensed over crackly airwaves. He starts his morning listening to the global news report from BBC World Service in London, and then switches to light jazz or classical.

“I love Brahms,” he said, as he winds through Kansas.

He celebrates his constant motion as liberation from the cubicle life that confines many workers. But as he hews to the interstates, what he mostly sees are the service corridors of American life, a generic blur of gas stations, fast food restaurants and liquor stores.

“After a while,” he said, “all the cities and towns run together.”

Traveling south on I-35, crossing from Missouri into Kansas, he rolls past an assisted living facility, a Harley dealership, an Applebee’s restaurant, and strip malls full of nail salons and check cashing places. He passes a Hostess Twinkie factory, an indoor sky diving place.

Mostly, he rolls through vast stretches of emptiness, the flat, largely treeless plains punctuated by distant herds of cattle.

He savors certain stretches of road, anticipating them for hundreds of miles. Today’s journey takes him through one of his favorites — the Flint Hills of Kansas.

“During the summer, the tall grass, the prairie grass is going full,” he said. “It blows gently in the wind. You can just listen to the wind. It’s such a calm and soothing feeling.”

The solitary life

One of the primary reasons young people tend not to stick as truck drivers, Graves explained, is the challenge of maintaining ties to the rest of the world.

Those with partners at home routinely receive calls and texts demanding clarity on when they will return, a layer of stress added atop the usual anxieties of the job. They reach home weary, anticipating relaxation and appreciation, only to confront the reality of built-up demands — worn-out partners left with sole responsibility for children, needed repairs — along with the fraught emotions of re-establishing connection.

Relationships frequently do not last, Graves said. He long ago made peace with his solitary existence.

More than a decade ago, he went on a few dates with a woman he met in Tennessee. Then, she began asking him how long he planned to continue driving.

“She said, ‘I’d like for us to have a relationship,’” he recalled. “I was flattered, but you know, what am I going to do if I just stop working? I have no income. I have no job for the time being. I just have love. That’s nice for a couple of days, but, you know, love is not automatically deposited in my payroll.”

Just after 4 p.m., he passes through the low-slung sprawl of Oklahoma City as the interstate widens to three lanes. A truck passing in the left lane hits a bump in the pavement, and its trailer shakes and rattles. Graves recoils.

“That scared the hell out of me,” he said. “I was afraid he was going to try to avoid it by coming over into my lane.”

Under federal regulations, he is required to take a 30-minute break within eight hours of driving. An electronic device installed in his cab shows the seconds ticking away, with less than 90 minutes left. His body is stiff. He could use a stretch. But he does not want to stop in Oklahoma City, not with rush hour building. He presses on.

By the time he reaches the truck stop south of Springer, the sun is grazing the horizon.

In trucker parlance, a gas station with food and showers is known as an oasis — a word not conjured by this particular place. Trucks are clustered together, their engines idling to produce heat. The toilets reek. The showers are filthy. Metal trays display fried chicken wings that appear to have been here for many hours.

But there is no guarantee he will find parking at the next stop, so this is where Graves opts to spend the night. He slides into a space between two other tractor-trailers and heads into the shop in search of dinner.

He selects a shrink-wrapped turkey sandwich and two Pop-Tarts — “one for dessert and one for breakfast.” He walks back to the truck under a crescent moon, ingests his food and slides into the lower bunk.

The next morning, he stops to fuel at a truck stop in Ardmore, Oklahoma, filling 132 gallons of diesel for \$416.76, the tab picked up by his employer via a company credit card.

Just before the Texas border, the sky still dark, he drives past a casino, the facades decked out like world landmarks — the Colosseum in Rome, Buckingham Palace, the Chrysler Building.

In Fort Worth, he navigates a tangle of cloverleaf merges and then locates his destination in a bewildering warren of warehouses. He drops off his load and then continues south as he listens to a report about the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas on the BBC.

“People buy too much crap,” he said.

	<p>Fifteen miles down the interstate in Grand Prairie, Texas, Graves hitches his tractor to a trailer bound for a Walmart distribution center near Kansas City. The paperwork shows that he is picking up 38,000 pounds of contact lenses, dog food, salsa and ground coffee.</p> <p>He retraces his route into Oklahoma, passing the night at a truck stop outside the town of Tonkawa. The next morning, he is on the road by 5, crossing into Kansas as a fiery sunrise seeps from the plains.</p> <p>He pulls off the interstate in Emporia, Kansas, and enjoys a rare sit-down meal — a waffle slathered in syrup, hash browns and a cup of coffee.</p> <p>He drops his trailer at an enormous Walmart lot just after 10 a.m. He is on track to reach Kansas City by midday, with a precious afternoon off. He plans to leave his tractor in the company yard and shell out more than \$100 for a night at a hotel.</p> <p>But an hour later, a dispatcher in Kansas City sends him a text message over the company satellite system. Another truck carrying pet food has broken down near Columbia, Missouri. Can Graves divert there — two hours away — rescue the load and carry it to a PetSmart distribution center in Joplin, Missouri?</p> <p>He reroutes, relinquishing his hotel bed for another night at a truck stop.</p> <p>“I was looking forward to a hot shower,” he said. “I’m tired, man. I kind of want to stretch out. But, hey, I’m just a machine, right?”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 CIA program collects data of Americans?
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation-politics/senators-cia-has-secret-program-that-collects-american-data/
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON (AP) — The CIA has a secret, undisclosed data repository that includes information collected about Americans, two Democrats on the Senate Intelligence Committee said. While neither the agency nor lawmakers would disclose specifics about the data, the senators alleged the CIA had long hidden details about the program from the public and Congress.</p> <p>Sens. Ron Wyden of Oregon and Martin Heinrich of New Mexico sent a letter to top intelligence officials calling for more details about the program to be declassified. Large parts of the letter, which was sent in April 2021 and declassified Thursday, and documents released by the CIA were blacked out. Wyden and Heinrich said the program operated “outside the statutory framework that Congress and the public believe govern this collection.”</p> <p>There have long been concerns about what information the intelligence community collects domestically, driven in part by previous violations of Americans’ civil liberties. The CIA and National Security Agency have a foreign mission and are generally barred from investigating Americans or U.S. businesses. But the spy agencies’ sprawling collection of foreign communications often snares Americans’ messages and data incidentally.</p> <p>Intelligence agencies are required to take steps to protect U.S. information, including redacting the names of any Americans from reports unless they are deemed relevant to an investigation. The process of removing redactions is known as “unmasking.”</p> <p>“CIA recognizes and takes very seriously our obligation to respect the privacy and civil liberties of U.S. persons in the conduct of our vital national security mission,” Kristi Scott, the agency’s privacy and civil liberties officer, said in a statement. “CIA is committed to transparency consistent with our obligation to protect intelligence sources and methods.”</p>

The CIA released a series of redacted recommendations about the program issued by an oversight panel known as the Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board. According to the document, a pop-up box warns CIA analysts using the program that seeking any information about U.S. citizens or others covered by privacy laws requires a foreign intelligence purpose.

“However, analysts are not required to memorialize the justification for their queries,” the board said.

Both senators have long pushed for more transparency from the intelligence agencies. Nearly a decade ago, a question Wyden posed to the nation’s spy chief presaged critical revelations about the NSA’s mass-surveillance programs.

In 2013, Wyden asked then-Director of National Intelligence James Clapper if the NSA collected “any type of data at all on millions or hundreds of millions of Americans.” Clapper initially responded, “No.” He later said, “Not wittingly.”

Former systems administrator Edward Snowden later that year revealed the NSA’s access to bulk data through U.S. internet companies and hundreds of millions of call records from telecommunications providers. Those revelations sparked worldwide controversy and new legislation in Congress.

Clapper would later apologize in a letter to the Senate Intelligence Committee, calling his response to Wyden “clearly erroneous.”

According to Wyden and Heinrich’s letter, the CIA’s bulk collection program operates outside of laws passed and reformed by Congress, but under the authority of Executive Order 12333, the document that broadly governs intelligence community activity and was first signed by President Ronald Reagan in 1981.

“It is critical that Congress not legislate without awareness of a ... CIA program, and that the American public not be misled into believe that the reforms in any reauthorization legislation fully cover the IC’s collection of their records,” the senators wrote in their letter. There was a redaction in the letter before “CIA program.”

Additional documents released by the CIA Thursday also revealed limited details about a program to collect financial data against the Islamic State. That program also has incidentally snared some records held by Americans.

Intelligence agencies are subject to guidelines on the handling and destruction of Americans’ data. Those guidelines and laws governing intelligence activity have evolved over time in response to previous revelations about domestic spying.

The FBI spied on the U.S. civil rights movement and secretly recorded the conversations of Dr. Martin Luther King. The CIA, in what was called Operation Chaos, investigated whether the movement opposing the Vietnam War had links to foreign countries.

“These reports raise serious questions about the kinds of information the CIA is vacuuming up in bulk and how the agency exploits that information to spy on Americans,” Patrick Toomey, a lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union, said in a statement. “The CIA conducts these sweeping surveillance activities without any court approval, and with few, if any, safeguards imposed by Congress.”

[Return to Top](#)

Crime, Criminals

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Arrest in DC high schools bomb threats
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/10/teenager-arrested-charged-in-bomb-threats-in-washington-schools.html

GIST	<p>A 16-year-old boy was arrested on Thursday and charged with calling in bomb threats at seven predominantly Black schools in Washington a day earlier, the city police department said.</p> <p>The four high schools and three charter schools, which were evacuated following Wednesday's bomb threats and later cleared, included Dunbar High School, which was threatened on Tuesday during a visit by U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris' husband.</p> <p>The teenager from Southeast Washington was charged with making "terrorist threats," the Metropolitan Police Department posted on Twitter. Authorities did not release the suspect's name and said the investigation into the incident was continuing.</p> <p>Authorities have not indicated a connection to race in the spate of bomb threats, and police said Tuesday's incident did not appear to be targeted at Harris' husband, Douglas Emhoff, who was visiting Dunbar for a Black History Month event.</p> <p>But the incidents have further raised fears among Black communities already rattled by a series of bomb threats made last week against at least a dozen historically Black colleges and universities, or HBCUs, nationwide.</p> <p>No explosives were found at any of the HBCUs, but the threats are being probed by the FBI.</p> <p>The United States faces heightened threats from extremist groups, underscored by the bomb threats at many HBCUs, among other factors, the Department of Homeland Security said on Monday.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Seattle homeless camp shooting; 1 injured
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/man-injured-early-morning-encampment-shooting-seattle/3ZW2QB7PZRATRLDX4RZP3WJ67M/
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Seattle police are investigating a shooting at an encampment early Thursday morning, according to a blotter post from the Seattle Police Department.</p> <p>Around 1:30 a.m., officers responded to a report that a man had been shot at an encampment near 10th Avenue South and South Lane Street.</p> <p>When officers arrived, they found a man with multiple gunshot wounds.</p> <p>Officers provided aid until Seattle Fire Department medics arrived and transported the man to Harborview Medical Center with life-threatening injuries.</p> <p>Detectives collected evidence at the scene.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/11 Ex-NFL player in healthcare fraud gets 5yrs
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/nfl-player-five-years-healthcare/
GIST	<p>A former player for the National Football League (NFL) has been jailed for five years for his part in a major fraud scheme involving over 50 other players.</p> <p>Robert McCune, 42, of Riverdale, Georgia, had already pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit health care fraud and wire fraud, 10 counts of wire fraud, 12 counts of healthcare fraud and three counts of aggravated identity theft.</p> <p>He's said to have defrauded the Gene Upshaw NFL Player Health Reimbursement Account Plan, which offers all players \$350,000 in tax-free, out-of-pocket medical care expenses for anything not covered by insurance.</p>

	<p>Between June 5 2017 and April 12 2018, McCune submitted false documents on behalf of dozens of former players and himself, seeking reimbursement for non-existent medical treatment and equipment, according to the Department of Justice (DoJ).</p> <p>This included expensive items such as hyperbaric oxygen chambers, ultrasound machines and electromagnetic therapy devices.</p> <p>McCune and his co-conspirators are said to have submitted around \$2.9m in fraudulent claims in this way.</p> <p>He's also said to have demanded bribes and kickbacks in the thousands of dollars for claims submitted on behalf of others, using their name, insurance identification number, social security number, mailing address and date of birth.</p> <p>Thirteen other defendants have already been sentenced for their role in the scheme, although a total of 68 claims were submitted on behalf of 51 players, the DoJ said.</p> <p>If anything, healthcare fraud is an even bigger problem today than at the time of McCune's wrongdoing, thanks to the COVID crisis.</p> <p>The US authorities opened a record number of cases in 2020: out of 900 new investigations that year, 580 were related to healthcare fraud, according to the DoJ.</p> <p>The growth of telemedicine during the pandemic has been a major driver of cybercrime, as it's easier to fake consultations and prescriptions when patients don't need to be physically present in clinics.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/11 Journalist fatally shot in southern Mexico
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/11/journalist-shot-dead-in-southern-mexico-taking-toll-to-five-this-year
GIST	<p>A journalist has been shot dead in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, the fifth killed in the country this year, state authorities said.</p> <p>Heber López, director of the online news site Noticias Web, was killed leaving a recording studio in the port city of Salina Cruz, said an official with the Oaxaca state security agency, who requested anonymity.</p> <p>Oaxaca state prosecutor, Arturo Peimbert Calvo, told Milenio TV that two suspects in the killing were in custody.</p> <p>López's murder follows those of four journalists in January.</p> <p>On 31 January, Roberto Toledo, a camera operator and video editor for the online site Monitor Michoacan, was shot by assailants as he prepared for an interview in Zitacuaro, Michoacan.</p> <p>In the border city of Tijuana, reporter Lourdes Maldonado López was found shot to death inside her car on 23 January, and six days earlier crime photographer Margarito Martínez was gunned down outside his home in the same city.</p> <p>Reporter José Luis Gamboa was killed in the Gulf coast state of Veracruz in an attack on 10 January.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/10 Sold pirated video games; gets 40mo. jail
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/technology/nintendo-hacker-gary-bowser.html
GIST	<p>A video game hacker and prominent member of a group that sold pirated video games, costing Nintendo and other companies more than \$65 million, was sentenced in federal court in Washington State on Thursday to 40 months in prison, prosecutors said.</p>

The hacker, Gary Bowser, 52, pleaded guilty to two felonies in October for his role in Team Xecuter, an operation that sold illegal devices that allowed people to play pirated video games on consoles like the Nintendo Switch, the Sony PlayStation Classic and the Microsoft Xbox, the U.S. attorney's office for the Western District of Washington said in a [statement](#) on Thursday.

As part of a plea arrangement, Mr. Bowser, a Canadian who was living in the Dominican Republic at the time of his arrest in September 2020, agreed to pay \$4.5 million in restitution to Nintendo of America.

"The damage goes beyond these businesses, harming video game developers and the small, creative studios whose products and hard work is essentially stolen," Nick Brown, the U.S. attorney, said in the statement.

Under the terms of his deal with prosecutors, Mr. Bowser pleaded guilty to conspiracy to circumvent technological measures and to traffic in circumvention devices, and to trafficking in circumvention devices, prosecutors said. Several other charges against him were dropped.

Prosecutors called Mr. Bowser a "prominent leader" of Team Xecuter, a video game piracy group whose products, they said, included online libraries of pirated video games. The group, which had over a dozen members around the world, also sold "circumvention devices" that allowed users to hack consoles like the Nintendo Switch, a popular hand-held device on which users can download games like Super Mario Odyssey and Super Smash Bros.

Mr. Bowser ran the group's websites and answered customer questions, prosecutors said.

"Mr. Bowser bears responsibility for stealing millions of dollars in profit," Donald M. Voiret, a special agent in charge of the F.B.I.'s Seattle field office, said in the statement from the U.S. attorney's office. The bureau and the Homeland Security Department were involved in the case.

In a [statement](#) on Thursday, Nintendo thanked federal authorities for their efforts to "curb illegal activities on a global scale that cause serious harm to Nintendo and the video game industry."

Michael Filipovic, one of Mr. Bowser's lawyers, did not immediately return phone calls or emails on Thursday seeking comment.

Mr. Bowser was deported from the Dominican Republic after his arrest in September 2020, prosecutors said. He was indicted along with two others: Max Louarn, 49, of France; and Yuanning Chen, 36, of China. They have not yet been extradited to the United States to face charges, Emily Langlie, a spokeswoman for the U.S. attorney's office, said on Thursday.

In a sentencing memorandum filed last week for Mr. Bowser, his lawyers wrote that he was "facing the brunt" of the government's prosecution. He had never met his co-defendants in person and "reaped the smallest profit" from the enterprise, according to his lawyers.

"His generosity is something that others have taken advantage of," his lawyers wrote. "In this case, Louarn used Mr. Bowser to be the public face of the enterprise."

Video game hackers have [become an increasing menace](#) to game companies in recent years, as attackers steal code and cut into the companies' profits. In June, [hackers claimed to have stolen source code](#) for the popular soccer game FIFA, which is made by the video game company Electronic Arts.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Richland shooter's 'disturbing' behavior
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/richland-fred-meyer-shooting-suspects-gym-says-he-was-banned-for-watching-members-taking-notes-on-them

RICHLAND, Wash. - A [memorial was held for the man killed in the Richland Fred Meyer shooting](#) earlier this week, and now, more details are emerging about the accused killer, Aaron Kelly.

According to court documents, [39-year-old Kelly opened fire at the Fred Meyer](#) on Jan. 7, killing 38-year-old Justin Krumbah and critically injuring another.

Police talked to Kelly's former roommate, who reported that Kelly had "been spiraling mentally and is very paranoid." The roommate told officers about [seeing Kelly with a 9mm handgun previously](#).

A Richland gym also noticed troubling behavior from Kelly before the shooting.

The gym, which wanted to remain anonymous, said they banned Kelly from all their locations because he would come in, watch members, and take notes about them.

An employee said Kelly had an iPad and was videotaping throughout the facility, which made other members uncomfortable.

"We realized that his bag was left behind and a notebook - a spiral notebook. And the page was open and we noticed on the front it said 'Kill _____'" in all caps, according to the gym employee. The name is not being stated for the safety of the person.

"There also [appeared to be surveillance times or notation times of random comings and goings of people](#). He would document random different names, talking about what time they were leaving or what time they were walking out of the bathroom," the gym employee continued.

The gym employee also stated that Kelly would visit different gym locations on the same day within hours at a time. He would show up in jeans, not workout clothes.

"He's a manipulator. He's a calculator. He plans everything out," Kelly's former roommate and landlord Bryant Scott told KAPP/KVEW News.

The man suspected in the deadly shooting at a Fred Meyer store in Richland, Washington had been known for previous shoplifting incidents, according to court documents.

Scott [put up cameras in his home](#) because he was that disturbed by Kelly's behavior. He said Kelly would follow him around the house, just staring at him as he went about his day. Like the gym reported, Scott said Kelly would observe and [track his routine](#).

He would also put a dresser in front of his bedroom door at night because was afraid of Kelly's unpredictable behavior.

Scott said he tried to get Kelly kicked out of the home for harassment and wanted his pistol taken away, but he couldn't be evicted due to the state's pandemic eviction moratorium. He ended up having to sell his house just to get Kelly out.

[On the day of the shooting](#), surveillance video showed Kelly going into the store and passing a man in an aisle. That man was later identified as Krumbah.

According to the court documents, the video showed the two people talking to each other and Krumbah back about his business. Kelly then shoots the man with a handgun and shoots him multiple times on the ground.

Krumbah died at the scene.

Kelly is seen leaving the aisle and shoots another person, who was taken to Kadlec Regional Medical Center and was in critical condition, police said. He then leaves the store.

	<p>He was arrested on I-90 between Sprague and Spokane about 12 hours after the shooting. He was booked into the Benton County Jail at about 2 a.m.</p> <p>Kelly is charged with first-degree murder and first-degree attempted murder.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Seattle police: shooting at crime hotspot
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/police-one-shot-near-12th-and-jackson-intersection
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Police are responding to a shooting at a known crime hotspot Thursday night, one day after local business owners called on city leaders to curb the violence in the area.</p> <p>Officers were called to investigate a shooting at 12th Avenue South and South Jackson Street. One victim was reported in the shooting. The man, 31, was shot multiple times, according to police. He was rushed to the hospital in stable condition.</p> <p>The corner of 12th and Jackson is a notorious spot known for illegal activity including drugs, stolen merchandise and shootings.</p> <p>People who live nearby said lately there's been no end to the violence.</p> <p>"I'm actually pretty concerned about it because it happens really often recently," said Jane Ho, who lives down the street from the shooting scene.</p> <p>Mayor Bruce Harrell has mounted a crackdown and said police have already made 23 felony arrests in the first three weeks of the year. Still, some question if it is making any difference.</p> <p>"What I'm seeing from the politicians is they are not willing to try anything different and they're just trying to amplify what has already been done," said a man who declined to give his name. "I don't think that's going to solve anything. I think we need a whole new approach."</p> <p>The mayor said he would lay out his plans for public safety on Tuesday during his State of the City address.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Home invasion in Pierce Co. turns deadly
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/man-shot-killed-midland-home-invasion/LVBJZLQPOFFC7DT3YIC6LT4NR4/
GIST	<p>PIERCE COUNTY, Wash. — A man was shot and killed during a home invasion in the Midland area of unincorporated Pierce County.</p> <p>At 12:38 a.m. Thursday, emergency dispatchers received a 911 call from a woman who said two men had broken into her apartment at 10th Avenue Court East and 76th Street Court East and shot her son, Pierce County Sheriff's Department Sgt. Darren Moss Jr. said.</p> <p>Deputies arrived and found a 38-year-old man with gunshot wounds. They gave him first aid, but he died at the scene.</p> <p>The victim's 5-month-old son was also in the apartment with the man and his mother at the time of the shooting.</p> <p>"This one here, this home invasion that's scary. I could not imagine someone coming to my door breaking in and killing me. I'm scared," said Thomas Anderson, who lives in the neighborhood.</p> <p>Moss said investigators believe the shooting is targeted, and not random.</p>

But neighbors are shaken up. This latest shooting comes on the heels of another murder about 150 feet away, where four people got shot and one was killed.

“It’s insane, it scary. Definitely looking to move out of the area as soon as we can. That’s our plan. We knew the area was troubled but didn’t really know the extent of it,” said Robert Reed, who recently moved to the neighborhood with his girlfriend.

No suspects are in custody and descriptions have not been released.

Today’s murder at these apartments marks the 11th homicide between Pierce County and Tacoma, about a 50% jump from this time last year.

So far in 2022, there have been five murders in Pierce County and six in Tacoma.

“It’s the highest I’ve seen,” Moss said.

It comes as Pierce County Sheriff’s Department is coping with a staffing shortage. Moss said the department is working to fill 40 positions.

Pierce County Executive Bruce Dammeier is also working on a plan to retain deputies. [He sent a letter](#) to the Pierce County Council on Thursday asking for the council to approve a \$4 million for the plan, [along with a supplemental budget](#).

“I urge the Council to approve funding for a \$10,000 retention incentive for every commissioned law enforcement deputy in the Pierce County Sheriff’s Department,” Dammeier said in the letter.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 FAA, police: help identify laser suspects
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/crime/sea-tac-airport-seattle-tacoma-laser-strikes-faa/281-caabfada-c39c-45b2-86c7-69ab4cad237a
GIST	<p>SEATAC, Wash. — The Federal Aviation Administration and the Port of Seattle Police are asking for the public’s help to find the person or persons who are shining lasers at planes landing and taking off from Sea-Tac airport.</p> <p>The FAA reported another six cases on Wednesday night, bringing the total to over two dozen incidents this week.</p> <p>Laser strikes are a safety issue in the cockpit and can damage pilots' eyesight.</p> <p>“It’s a very serious safety issue,” said David Suomi, administrator for the FAA’s Northwest Mountain Region based in Des Moines, Washington. “Whenever we can, we investigate –the public can help us a lot by reporting when they see this happening, and we can have local law enforcement investigate. But the numbers across the state and across the country have gone up remarkably. In the state of Washington, we went from 196 in 2020, to 397 last year.”</p> <p>Nationally, there's been a 41% increase in laser incident reports in 2021 over 2020, with nearly 10 thousand cases nationwide. Washington ranks as the 8th highest for the number of “lazings” per capita. While some pilot reports of lasers happen several thousand feet up, most are close to the ground.</p> <p>The FAA asks the public if they have information or have witnessed someone aim a laser at a plane, to email laserreports@FAA.gov. The Port of Seattle is asking the public to call 911 if they see anybody out pointing lasers at planes.</p> <p>Using a laser against an aircraft is a felony in both state and federal law and can lead to \$11,000 in civil penalties per incident from the FAA.</p>

HEADLINE	02/10 Hotline tip: man trafficking minors; arrest
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/crime/seattle-man-trafficking-teens-crime/281-8ebca737-4d9a-4203-88fc-441b3e643331
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — A Seattle man appeared in federal court Thursday after being charged with two felonies related to human trafficking. It's a case that came to law enforcement's attention thanks to a tip called into a national hotline.</p> <p>On Thursday, there was a detention hearing where it was determined that Issac Shorack, 23, will remain detained pending trial.</p> <p>Assistant U.S. Attorney Kate Crisham said Shorack was brought to the FBI's attention after someone reached out to the National Human Trafficking Hotline.</p> <p>"This particular tip was very helpful," said Crisham.</p> <p>The tipster said that Shorack was trafficking minors on Aurora Avenue. The FBI began to investigate in mid-November.</p> <p>"Law enforcement was able to receive some text messages between Mr. Shorack and his victims," said Crisham. "For several months, he had been trafficking them and having them work on Aurora Avenue, engaging in commercial sex acts with sex buyers."</p> <p>An undercover agent, posing as a 17-year-old female, was able to make contact.</p> <p>"Mr. Shorack almost immediately began recruiting this person who unbeknownst to him was an undercover officer," Crisham explained.</p> <p>Crisham says Shorack encouraged the teen to come to Seattle from Denver, and even purchased the plane ticket. But when he arrived at Sea-Tac airport to pick her up, officers took him away instead.</p> <p>"We do see just a steady stream of cases in this jurisdiction, and we've made it a real priority to focus on those cases," said U.S. Attorney Nick Brown.</p> <p>As for this case, Crisham says, "I think it shows what can happen when law enforcement works together with community members to identify potential victims, and to hopefully bring them to safety and to take traffickers on the streets."</p> <p>If convicted, the charges the defendant is facing, are punishable by a mandatory minimum term of imprisonment of ten years.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Police: this Valentine's Day turn in your ex
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/02/10/police-department-encourages-people-to-snitch-on-exes/
GIST	<p>For many people, February is a month to celebrate love, with couples giving each other flowers, chocolates and stuffed animals.</p> <p>But several police departments are encouraging people to reject romantic tradition and instead turn their exes in this Valentine's Day.</p> <p>If a former flame wronged you and they happen to have outstanding warrants — or perhaps drugs in their car — the Port Orange Police Department in Florida is standing by and ready to take action.</p>

"Give us a call with their location and we'll take care of the rest," the Port Orange Police Department wrote on [Facebook](#) Wednesday.

At least two other police departments have posted the same message on their Facebook accounts in recent days, including Louisiana's [Lake Arthur Police Department](#) and [Georgia's Rockmart Police](#).

In an unorthodox strategy to encourage the community to come forward with tips, the law enforcement agencies are offering a Valentine's Day "month-long special."

The "special" includes "a set of limited-edition platinum bracelets, free transportation with a chauffeur, a one-night minimum stay in luxurious accommodations and professional glamour shots that will be posted on online for all to enjoy," the post says.

It goes on: "We know this special is so incredible that you may be tempted to provide additional referrals. We don't blame you, this special is too sweet to pass by!"

Within a day of being shared by the Port Orange Police Department, the post has been liked and shared thousands of times, with social media users praising its creativity and hilariousness.

"Genius!" one user wrote. "Somebody give this social media manager a raise!" another chimed in.

Lisa Remington, a cashier from Edgewater, Fla., was one of those users who weighed in and complimented the post. But she said Thursday she feared that the invitation to submit information about exes could prompt people to act out of spite and revenge without providing solid information.

"It might be effective or it could be a little vindictive depending on what the warrant is for," she told The Washington Post Thursday.

Maria Haberfeld, chair of the law and police science department at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, echoed similar concerns and described these types of campaigns as "inappropriate" and warned of the dangers of trivializing criminal conduct.

"As much as I am all for a hint of humor inserted into police-community relations, there is nothing funny about people committing crimes," she told The Post Thursday.

Haberfeld said such initiatives could possibly incite people "to provide false information as part of a revenge scheme" and added it could also put the potential informers "on a path of danger, if and when one of the 'exes' finds out who provided the police with the information," she said.

Even if there was evidence of similar campaigns leading to prosecutions — which she did not have knowledge of — Haberfeld warned against them, saying the risks "outweigh the potential benefits."

Sgt. William Harrison, interim public information officer at the Port Orange police, said they "copied" the idea — and exact same message — from another county police department in Florida, though he did not specify which department.

By Thursday afternoon, he said they have not yet received any solid tips but hoped the public will offer information about "lesser crimes and misdemeanors" including battery, stolen merchandise or vehicles.

"But we are open to pretty much anybody with a warrant ready to get picked up," he said in an interview Thursday. "A warrant about domestic violence would be great."

Harrison said the campaign presented a win-win situation, where the police could get relevant information on people they might not be actively searching for, since he said the department focuses on felony warrants for more serious crimes.

	“We can’t do our job without the public’s cooperation and we definitely can’t find people without their cooperation, so this is a good way to remind people that we need them,” he said.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Seattle man in Capitol riot gets 6mo. jail
SOURCE	https://www.seattlepi.com/news/article/Capitol-rioter-gets-prison-as-feds-reach-100-16848931.php
GIST	<p>A Seattle man who punched two police officers during last year's riot at the U.S. Capitol was sentenced to six months imprisonment on Thursday, as the Justice Department reached a milestone in one of the largest federal investigations in American history.</p> <p>Mark Leffingwell, a 52-year-old military veteran who was wounded in Iraq, is at least the 100th person to be sentenced after pleading guilty to a Capitol riot-related charge, according to an Associated Press review of court records.</p> <p>The judge who sentenced Leffingwell pushed back on a recent Republican National Committee resolution that accused the congressional committee investigating the Jan. 6 attack of leading a “persecution of ordinary citizens engaged in legitimate political discourse.” U.S. District Judge Amy Berman Jackson also lamented that mainstream news outlets are still amplifying the lie that the 2020 presidential election was illegitimate and stolen from former President Donald Trump.</p> <p>"And, worse, it has become heresy for a member of the former president’s party to say otherwise,” the judge said. “It needs to be crystal clear that it is not patriotism, it is not standing up for America, it is not legitimate political discourse and it is not justified to descend on the nation’s capital at the direction of a disappointed candidate and disrupt the electoral process.”</p> <p>More than 730 people have been charged with federal crimes stemming from the riot on Jan. 6, 2021. Over 210 of them have pleaded guilty, mostly to misdemeanors with a maximum sentence of 6 months imprisonment.</p> <p>Leffingwell is the fifth rioter to be sentenced for assaulting police at the Capitol. The other four received prison sentences ranging from 41 to 63 months in prison.</p> <p>Leffingwell told Jackson that he was embarrassed and ashamed.</p> <p>“It was not something I planned to do,” he said. “Looking back on it, it was like a nightmare.”</p> <p>Jackson also sentenced Leffingwell to two years of supervised release and ordered him to perform 200 hours of community service.</p> <p>The judge sentenced Leffingwell to a significantly shorter prison term than other rioters who assaulted police officers. Jackson said she considered the possibility that Veterans Affairs disability compensation payments can be reduced if a veteran is convicted of a felony and imprisoned for more than 60 days.</p> <p>The judge said it appears that Leffingwell's benefits could be restored once he is released. But she said she is willing to reconsider Leffingwell's sentence if his defense attorney demonstrates that she is wrong.</p> <p>The judge told Leffingwell that he wasn't just carried along by the crowd or acting impulsively that day.</p> <p>“You chose this battle, and you patted yourself on the back for your bravery,” she told him.</p> <p>Leffingwell, who didn't have a criminal history before this case, pleaded guilty to an assault charge in October.</p> <p>Police had been battling rioters at the Senate Wing doors for nearly two hours before Leffingwell arrived there on Jan. 6. As he stood at the front of the crowd of rioters, Leffingwell chanted “Stop the steal!” and yelled “Shame!” and “Join us!” at a line of police officers near the entrance, prosecutors said.</p>

Leffingwell admitted that he punched two Capitol officers in the head as they tried to repel him and other rioters. Neither officer was seriously injured by Leffingwell, who was arrested before he could escape into the crowd. One of the officers assaulted by Leffingwell said the rioter apologized to him after he was apprehended.

Prosecutors had recommended a prison sentence of two years and three months for Leffingwell. Sentencing guidelines calculated by the court's probation department called for a prison sentence ranging from two years to two years and six months, but Jackson wasn't bound by the recommendations.

Leffingwell served in U.S. Marines before joining the U.S. Army National Guard. He was wounded on duty in Iraq in 2008, according to prosecutors.

"Leffingwell, a military veteran who once defended the Constitution from all enemies, foreign and domestic, willingly betrayed his nation and became an enemy of the United States on January 6," prosecutors wrote.

Rioters injured more than 100 officers at the Capitol on Jan. 6. The Justice Department says more than 225 riot defendants have been charged with assaulting or impeding law enforcement, but few have pleaded guilty.

Most of the sentenced defendants entered the Capitol but weren't accused of engaging in violent or destructive behavior. Resolving low-level cases tends to be easier and quicker for prosecutors.

Of the 100 people sentenced so far, 41 have received terms of imprisonment ranging from 10 days to 63 months. That includes two rioters who were sentenced to jail time already served. Just eight defendants have been sentenced to more than one year in prison.

Thirty-two others were sentenced to periods of home detention ranging from one to three months. At least 54 riot defendants have been ordered to perform between 40 and 250 hours of community service as a condition of probation or supervised release.

Collectively, the defendants have been ordered to pay fines totaling nearly \$65,000 and nearly \$58,000 in restitution. Fixing damage caused by the rioters cost nearly \$1.5 million.

Dozens of defendants have trial dates. The first trial for a rioter is scheduled to start on Feb. 28.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Whatcom deputies shot, suspect in custody
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/state/article258275528.html
GIST	<p>Two Whatcom County Sheriff's Office deputies were shot Thursday in the Peaceful Valley area of Whatcom County while reportedly trying to break up a neighborhood dispute in which two people were shooting at each other.</p> <p>A sheriff's office news release Thursday night said both injured deputies were "conscious, alert and in stable condition," at St. Joseph's hospital in Bellingham.</p> <p>The suspect in the shooting surrendered after approximately an hour and half at 6:02 p.m. and was taken into custody, according to the release, which did not include the suspect's name.</p> <p>Deputies were called to the neighborhood dispute in the Peaceful Valley area at approximately 4:18 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 10, Slater reported. They arrived on scene and reportedly tried to speak with a man who had a shotgun.</p> <p>As they attempted to speak from the street with the man, both deputies were shot.</p>

	<p>The investigation remains active, according to the release, which added that the sheriff's office has requested that the Law Enforcement Mutual Aid Response Team take over the investigation.</p> <p>A tweet by Washington State Patrol Trooper Jacob Kennett at 6:09 p.m. said "the subject has now surrendered and is in custody. It is unknown if there are other occupants in the residence." The Herald has asked the sheriff's office to confirm.</p> <p>More than a dozen law enforcement vehicles from various Whatcom County agencies were seen speeding eastbound on the Mount Baker Highway.</p> <p>According to unconfirmed emergency broadcasts at the time, Mount Baker Highway was shut down for a period and law enforcement cleared intersections in Bellingham for medical units that were on their way to St. Joseph's hospital in Bellingham.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/10 US files first environmental case on Mexico
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/us-files-1st-usmca-environment-case-mexico-porpoise-82810091
GIST	<p>MEXICO CITY -- The U.S. Trade Representative's Office filed the first environmental complaint against Mexico Thursday for failing to protect the critically endangered vaquita marina, the world's smallest porpoise.</p> <p>The office said it had asked for "environment consultations" with Mexico, the first such case it has filed under the U.S.-Mexico-Canada free trade pact. Consultations are the first step in the dispute resolution process under the trade agreement, which entered into force in 2020. If not resolved, it could eventually lead to trade sanctions.</p> <p>Mexico's government has largely abandoned attempts to enforce a fishing-free zone around an area where the last few vaquitas are believed to live. Nets set illegally for another fish, the totoaba, drown vaquitas.</p> <p>U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai said that "USTR is committed to protecting the environment and is requesting this consultation to ensure Mexico lives up to its USMCA environment commitments," adding "We look forward to working with Mexico to address these issues."</p> <p>Sarah Uhlemann, international program director at the Center for Biological Diversity, said "this is a big move that could save these little porpoises from extinction."</p> <p>"Illegal fishing is out of control in Mexican waters, and the vaquita is paying the highest possible price," Uhlemann said in a statement. "We're glad the U.S. government is taking Mexico to task for violating its environmental obligations and threatening the vaquita's existence."</p> <p>Mexico's Economy Department said after the complaint was announced Thursday that "The Mexican government reaffirms its commitment to the proper implementation of the USMCA and the responsibilities it has within it."</p> <p>It was the second stinging rebuke in less than a week for Mexico, which has done a poor job controlling the environmental practices of its fishing boats.</p> <p>On Monday, Mexican fishing boats in the Gulf of Mexico were "prohibited from entering U.S. ports, will be denied port access and services," the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said, in response to years of Mexican boats illegally poaching red snapper in the Gulf.</p> <p>Mexico's foreign relations secretary, Marcelo Ebrard, said incidents of fishing by Mexican boats in U.S. waters were mistakes, saying it can be difficult to locate the dividing line between the two countries' territorial waters.</p>

But critics say it seems more likely that Mexican boats are going where the fish are, rather than making the same navigational error over and over again. The U.S. Coast Guard has apprehended many repeat offenders, with some Mexican fishermen being caught in U.S. waters over 20 times since 2014.

But the plight of the vaquita marina — of which perhaps as few as 10 survive in the Gulf of California — that has made Mexico look the worst.

For example, Mexican authorities allowed the environmentalist group Sea Shepherd to return to the Gulf, also known as the Sea of Cortez, to help in conservation efforts, but no longer allows the group to remove illegal gill nets.

It was the latest instance in which the Mexican government appeared to give more weight to sovereignty and fishing concerns than to protecting the species.

For years, Mexico has relied on Sea Shepherd boats to remove most of the illegal nets that trap and drown vaquitas, while doing relatively little to combat violent attacks by poachers on the environmentalists' ships. The group estimates it has removed about 1,000 of the long, heavy nets over the last six years.

But the environmentalists were forced to leave the Gulf in January 2021 after a New Year's Eve attack in which fishermen rammed a Sea Shepherd vessel with their boat; one of the fishermen later reportedly died of injuries sustained in that attack.

Since then, the job of locating and removing nets has been largely left to Mexico's navy, which has done little to stop fishermen setting nets to catch totoaba, a fish whose swim bladder is a delicacy in China and sells for thousands of dollars per pound (kilogram).

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has expressed his dislike of foreign interference, and his desire to balance the interests of fishermen and endangered species.

"We don't need foreigners telling us what to do or placing sanction on our country's fishermen," López Obrador said in June. He insisted that "we can reach an agreement that seeks an equilibrium between fishing and productive activities, and taking care of species."

That attitude appeared to be behind the government's decision in July to abandon the policy of maintaining a fishing-free zone around the small area holding the last remaining vaquitas.

The measure announced replaces the fishing-free "zero tolerance" zone in the upper Gulf with a sliding scale of punishments if more than 60 fishing boats are seen in the area on multiple occasions.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Police kill shooting suspect after rampage
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/suspected-colorado-church-shooter-killed-police-crime-rampage/story?id=82799151
GIST	<p>A man suspected in a suburban Denver church shooting that left a woman dead and two ministers wounded was shot to death by police after going on a crime rampage, authorities said.</p> <p>Jose De Jesus Montoya Villa, 31, was wanted on murder charges stemming from the fatal shooting last week at a church in Aurora when he allegedly set out on a violent crime spree Wednesday afternoon that ended in his death, said Agent Matthew Longshore of the Aurora Police Department.</p> <p>"Obviously, this person was not afraid to fire their weapon. We're all relieved that no officers were hurt and we're relieved that a violent criminal has been taken off the streets," Longshore said at a news conference Friday night.</p>

An arrest warrant was issued for Montoya Villa on Saturday after homicide detectives identified him as the prime suspect in the fatal shooting at the Iglesia Faro De Luz Church around 8:45 p.m. on Friday. Police allege that Montoya Villa was attending a function at the church with up to 20 people when he suddenly opened fire, killing his ex-girlfriend, Adela Maria Madrid, 37, and wounding two church ministers, police said.

A search was going on for Montoya Villa on Wednesday when the suspect allegedly went on a crime rampage. Longshore said that in roughly 55 minutes Montoya Villa allegedly shot a 26-year-old man in a parking lot in Aurora, carjacked two vehicles, was involved in a hit-and-run, robbed a liquor store and led police on a chase.

The pursuit ended around 4:45 p.m. in the neighboring town of Centennial where police officers cornered him and shot him, Longshore said. Montoya Villa was taken to a hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

Longshore said police did not know the identity of the suspect until officers followed the ambulance to the hospital and realized it was Montoya Villa.

The 18th Judicial District's Critical Incident Response Team is spearheading the investigation of the officer-involved shooting and is expected to review police body-camera video to determine if Montoya Villa fired at police and how many shots officers fired at the suspect, Longshore said.

The two officers involved in the shooting have been placed on administrative leave, pending further investigation.

No officers were injured in the episode. The man who was wounded in the parking lot shooting suffered non-life-threatening injuries, Longshore said.

Aurora police Chief Vanessa Wilson posted a message on Twitter saying she was "extremely relieved that my officers were not injured."

"They stopped a dangerous criminal from further victimizing our community," Wilson said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 DC high schools threatened for 3 rd day
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory/dc-high-schools-receive-bomb-threats-3rd-straight-82808766
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON -- Public high schools in Washington, D.C., faced a fresh wave of bomb threats Thursday, despite the arrest of a teenager who is accused of making some of the previous threats. No hazardous materials were found.</p> <p>Five high schools were evacuated and searched Thursday after receiving bomb threats over the phone.</p> <p>The new wave of threats came a day after seven high schools were evacuated due to identical threats, and several hours after police arrested a juvenile suspect accused of making Wednesday's bomb threats.</p> <p>The Metropolitan Police Department announced Thursday morning on Twitter that a 16-year-old male had been arrested and "charged with Terroristic Threats in connection to multiple bomb threats yesterday."</p> <p>Thursday was the third consecutive day that a bomb threat forced the evacuation of a D.C. high school. On Tuesday, Dunbar High School was evacuated after receiving a bomb threat while Doug Emhoff, the husband of Vice President Kamala Harris, was visiting the school for an event.</p> <p>Dunbar was also evacuated following another threat Wednesday, and two other high schools — IDEA Public Charter School and McKinley Tech High School — were evacuated both Wednesday and Thursday.</p>

	<p>The fact that the bomb threats continued after the arrest indicates multiple actors, and possibly copycats. Police would not comment on whether the ongoing threats were coordinated in any way, saying only that they continue to investigate the issue in partnership with the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.</p> <p>District of Columbia Public Schools spokesman Enrique Gutierrez said the school system “takes these threats very seriously” and was working with authorities to continue the investigation.</p>
Return to Top	

Information From Online Communities and Unclassified Sources/InFOCUS is a situational awareness report published daily by the Washington State Fusion Center.

If you no longer wish to receive this report, please submit an email to intake@wsfc.wa.gov and enter UNSUBSCRIBE InFOCUS in the Subject line.

DISCLAIMER - the articles highlighted within InFOCUS is for informational purposes only and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Washington State Fusion Center, the City of Seattle, the Seattle Police Department or the Washington State Patrol and have been included only for ease of reference and academic purposes.

FAIR USE Notice All rights to these copyrighted items are reserved. Articles and graphics have been placed within for educational and discussion purposes only, in compliance with 'Fair Use' criteria established in Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976. The principle of 'Fair Use' was established as law by Section 107 of The Copyright Act of 1976. 'Fair Use' legally eliminates the need to obtain permission or pay royalties for the use of previously copyrighted materials if the purposes of display include 'criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, and research.' Section 107 establishes four criteria for determining whether the use of a work in any particular case qualifies as a 'fair use'. A work used does not necessarily have to satisfy all four criteria to qualify as an instance of 'fair use'. Rather, 'fair use' is determined by the overall extent to which the cited work does or does not substantially satisfy the criteria in their totality. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes of your own that go beyond 'fair use,' you must obtain permission from the copyright owner. For more information go to: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml>>

THIS DOCUMENT MAY CONTAIN COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL. COPYING AND DISSEMINATION IS PROHIBITED WITHOUT PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNERS.

Source: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml>

[Return to Top](#)